

REVENGE: Of ELI PARKER

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O.S. Text: Based on actual events.  
Title:  
REVENGE: Of ELI PARKER

FADE IN:

**SCENE 1 - INT. STRIP CLUB - NIGHT**

Red neon bathes the walls.

Music thumps through the air—bass heavy and relentless.

Denise (early 20s) stands at the bar, sipping something bright pink through a straw.

She looks tired in her sequined top—her eyes unfocused, glassy.

A BOUNCER leans over to her.

**BOUNCER**

Your set's in five.

Denise nods, barely listening.

She turns and glances toward the mirrored stage where other dancers sway under colored lights.

She rubs at a faint bruise on her wrist.

**INT. CLUB - DRESSING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Denise sits at a lighted vanity, reapplying lipstick with a shaky hand.

She studies herself in the mirror—her reflection blurred with glitter and sweat.

**DENISE (V.O.)**

Just get through tonight.

(beat)

Just get through.

She forces a brittle smile and stands, adjusting her straps.

**INT. CLUB - STAGE - LATER**

Denise moves under the red lights, body mechanical.

A group of men at a table cheer and wave bills.

Denise doesn't look at them—she stares into the dark, someplace far away.

**INT. CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT**

Denise sits on the edge of a sagging bed, smoking.

Her purse spills open beside her—lipstick, cash, a bottle of pills.

A JOHN (40s) pulls his shirt back on, counting bills.

Denise watches him, numb.

**JOHN**

You want a ride somewhere?

Denise shakes her head.

He shrugs, tucks the money into her purse, and leaves without another word.

The door clicks shut.

Denise exhales a shaky breath.

She stubs out her cigarette in a chipped ashtray.

**INT. MOTEL BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

She splashes water on her face, studying herself in the cracked mirror.

Her mascara runs in dark streaks down her cheeks.

**DENISE (V.O.)**

I'm doing the best I can.

She closes her eyes.

**INT. TRAILER BEDROOM - NIGHT**

The camera drifts through a **dark, filthy trailer bedroom**. Moonlight slashes across a **thin, dirty mattress** on the floor.

A **YOUNG ELI PARKER (6)** sleeps in a tangle of old blankets. His cheeks are streaked with dried tears.

On the walls: **taped-up pages from men's magazines**, corners curling from grease and neglect.

In the next room, **MUFFLED SHOUTING** erupts—a man's drunken roar, a woman's shrill scream.

**ELI**  
(stirs, eyes flickering  
open)  
MOMMY?

He shivers, listening.

**INT. TRAILER LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

**DENISE PARKER (20s)**—half-naked, smudged makeup, clutching a bottle of cheap gin—shrieks in the face of **RANDY COLE (30s)**, who towers over her, shirtless, sweating, reeking of liquor.

**RANDY COLE**  
—always running your mouth, bitch.  
You think you can talk to me like  
that?

He backhands her across the jaw. She staggers into the wall, smearing blood on the wood paneling.

**DENISE PARKER**  
(voice slurred)  
Don't—don't you hit me, you piece  
of shit—

**RANDY COLE**  
I'll do more than hit you.

He grabs her by the hair and drags her toward the kitchen.

**ELI (O.S.)**  
(tiny, trembling)  
MOMMY?

**SILENCE.**

They both freeze. Then Randy Cole turns his head slowly, eyes dark.

**INT. TRAILER BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

The Eli is standing in the doorway, small and shaking in Spider-Man pajamas.

Then Randy Cole glares at him.

**RANDY COLE**

What'd I tell you about coming out here?

The boy doesn't answer. His lip quivers.

**DENISE PARKER**

(voice distant, hollow)  
Go back to bed, baby.

**RANDY COLE**

(advancing)  
I said—what'd I tell you?

He raises his hand. The boy bolts back into the bedroom, diving onto the mattress. He pulls the blanket over his head, trying to disappear.

**THUMP—THUMP—THUMP—** Footsteps approach.

The Eli curls tighter, breath ragged.

**SILENCE.**

A soft *click*. The bedroom light goes out.

**RANDY COLE (O.S.) (CONT'D)**

Go to sleep.

The door slams shut.

**The boy begins to cry soundlessly.**

**INT. SMALL KITCHEN - NIGHT**

Denise paces, her mascara smudged.

A bottle of cheap vodka sweats on the counter.

Eli peeks from behind a chair, clutching a stuffed raccoon.

Randy (30s) slams a cabinet door.

**RANDY**

You gonna stand there crying all night?

Denise doesn't answer.

Randy's gaze drifts to Eli.

He shakes his head, disgusted.

**RANDY (CONT'D)**

Little bastard don't even know how worthless he is.

Denise wipes her eyes.

**DENISE**

Just leave him alone.

Randy throws up his hands and storms out.

Denise leans on the counter, trembling.

Eli sinks to the floor, hugging his knees.

**EXT. BARN - NIGHT**

Eli stands at the doorway, glancing over his shoulder toward the house.

Wayne (40s) leans against the fence, lighting a cigarette.

**WAYNE**

Don't bother going back in. You sleep out here tonight.

Eli's lip quivers.

**ELI**

It's cold.

Wayne exhales smoke.

**WAYNE**

Good. Maybe you'll learn something.

Eli looks at the straw-strewn floor, too tired to argue.

**SCENE 2 - INT. TRAILER KITCHEN - MORNING**

Morning light leaks into the **small, filthy kitchen**. A buzzing fly circles a mountain of unwashed dishes.

**DENISE** slumps at the table, cigarette burning down between two fingers. Her lipstick is smeared, her face bruised.

A **half-empty gin bottle** sits by her elbow. She stares into nothing.

**ELI** tiptoes in, barefoot. He's wearing the same Spider-Man pajamas. He keeps his eyes down.

He opens the fridge. Nothing inside but a carton of eggs, two beers, and a jar of pickles floating in yellow brine.

He closes the fridge, stomach growling.

**DENISE**

(hoarse whisper)

Eli.

He freezes.

She doesn't look at him, just lifts the cigarette to her lips.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

I don't... I don't know why you look  
at me like that.

He doesn't answer. He edges toward the back door.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

I'm your mother. You know that?

She turns to look at him. Her eyes are glassy, unfocused.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

You're all I got left.

Eli shifts from foot to foot, silent.

**RANDY (O.S.)**

(shouting from the  
hallway)

Denise! Where's my fuckin'  
lighter?!

**DENISE**

(yells back)

Look in your goddamn pants pocket!

Eli flinches. He backs toward the door again.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

(voice suddenly soft)

Go on. Go ride your bike.

Eli hesitates. He's not sure if it's a trick.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

Just... don't go far.

He nods.

**EXT. TRAILER PARK - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli pushes a **rusty BMX bike** across patchy grass. He looks over his shoulder to the trailer. No one watching.

He climbs on and pedals away—fast, like he can escape something chasing him.

**EXT. WOODED PATH - CONTINUOUS**

Eli rides deeper into the trees, tires crunching over leaves and broken glass.

He stops by a **small drainage creek**, drops the bike.

He sits on a flat rock, pulls his knees to his chest.

**CLOSE ON Eli's face.**

Tears start to spill. He wipes them away hard, angry at himself for crying.

He picks up a **sharp stick** and starts carving a **line into the rock**.

Another line.

Another.

He's keeping count of something he can't say out loud.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Someday I'm gonna leave.  
I'm gonna leave, and they won't  
find me.  
Someday I won't be scared.

A **single, glistening tear** drips onto the rock.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

A battered TV plays cartoons with the volume low.

Denise (early 20s) sits on the sofa, smoking, eyes half-closed.

Eli (6) sits on the floor, coloring with broken crayons.

He stops, looking up at her, tentative.

**ELI**

Mom?



She doesn't look away from the TV.

**DENISE**

What.

**ELI**

Where's daddy?

Denise blinks, caught off-guard.

**DENISE**

Why you asking about him?

Eli fidgets with a crayon, voice small.

**ELI**

I just...wanna know where he is.

Denise exhales smoke, staring at the ceiling.

**DENISE**

I don't know.

Eli's brow furrows.

**ELI**

You don't know who he is?

Denise shakes her head, tired.

**DENISE**

No, Eli. I don't.

(beat)

And even if I did, he wouldn't be here.

Eli looks down at his coloring book.

**ELI**

Oh.

A long silence stretches between them.

**DENISE**

It's just you and me. That's all.

She says it like it's a fact, not a comfort.

Eli picks up a blue crayon, trying not to cry.

FADE TO:

**EXT. BABYSITTER'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

A modest one-story house with a sagging porch.

Yellow light spills through the windows.

A battered sedan pulls to the curb.

Denise, pale and jittery, leans over to the passenger seat.

Eli clutches his stuffed animal, watching her nervously.

**DENISE**

Come on, baby. It's just for  
tonight.

Eli doesn't move.

**ELI**

Can't I stay with you?

Denise sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose.

**DENISE**

Don't start. Just...get out of the  
car.

Eli opens the door slowly.

His small sneakers hit the cracked sidewalk.

**EXT. BABYSITTER'S PORCH - CONTINUOUS**

Denise walks him up the steps.

She bangs on the screen door.

**PAM (O.S.)**

Hold your horses.

**PAM (30s)** opens the door, hair in rollers, cigarette dangling  
from her mouth.

She looks Eli over with mild irritation.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

This him?

Denise nods.

**DENISE**

Just till tomorrow. I'll pick him  
up after work.

PAM eyes her skeptically.

**PAM**

Like last time?

Denise's jaw tightens.

**DENISE**

Don't start.

She kneels in front of Eli, forcing a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

Be good, okay? I'll see you tomorrow.

Eli's eyes brim with tears.

**ELI**

Promise?

Denise hesitates—just for a breath.

**DENISE**

Promise.

She stands and turns away quickly, hurrying down the steps.

**EXT. SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS**

Denise gets back in her car.

For a moment, she rests her forehead on the steering wheel.

Then she starts the engine and drives away without looking back.

**EXT. BABYSITTER'S PORCH - CONTINUOUS**

Eli stands there, watching the red taillights vanish into the dark.

PAM sighs and nudges him inside.

**PAM**

Come on. It's late.

Then door shuts behind them.

**SCENE 3 - INT. BABYSITTER'S HOUSE - LATER NIGHT**

A small living room, tidy but stale. The TV flickers blue light across as he sits cross-legged on the floor.

He clutches a **stuffed raccoon** by its tail, rocking slightly.

**PAM HASKINS (30s)**—broad-shouldered, frizzy hair in a messy bun—paces behind him, phone pressed to her ear.

**PAM**

(into phone)

Denise, it's Pam again... It's past midnight, where the hell are you?

Eli glances over his shoulder. Pam doesn't notice.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

(into phone, low)

This boy's been sitting here for hours... You can't just dump him off like a sack of potatoes...

She hangs up. Sighs.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

(slightly softer)

Eli, honey? You want a sandwich or something?

Eli shakes his head.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

Your mama said she'd be back by nine.

No response.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

I'm sure she... (her voice trails off)

She doesn't sound sure.

**CUT TO:**

**LATER THAT NIGHT**

**INT. BABYSITTER'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli sits on the couch, clutching a small trash bag.

Pam hangs up the phone, frowning.

**PAM**

Your mama hasn't been to work in three days.

Eli looks down at his shoes.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

Guess you're stuck here for a while.

She sits beside him, too close.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

You want to be a good boy, don't you?

Eli doesn't respond.

(O.S.) Text: NEXT DAY

**INT. BABYSITTER'S HOUSE - MORNING**

A small living room cluttered with magazines and ashtrays.

Cartoons play low on the TV.

Eli sits cross-legged on the couch, hugging his stuffed raccoon.

He glances nervously at the front door every few seconds.

Pam bustles around the kitchen, making instant coffee.

**PAM**

You want cereal or what?

Eli doesn't answer.

He keeps watching the door.

Pam sighs and pours herself coffee.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER**

Eli's eyes are heavy.

The cartoons have ended.

Sunlight has shifted across the carpet.

Still no car pulling up outside.

**PAM (O.S.)**

I told you—she said tomorrow.

Eli blinks, confused.

**ELI**

She said today.

Pam doesn't look up from her coffee.

**PAM**

Well, she ain't here, is she?

Eli's lip trembles.

**ELI**

Maybe she forgot where I am.

Pam finally looks at him—her expression somewhere between pity and annoyance.

**PAM**

She didn't forget.

Eli stares at her, silent.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON**

Eli sits in the same spot.

The light outside is fading.

He glances at the door again.

His small voice breaks the silence:

**ELI**

Mom?

No answer.

He curls up on the couch, hugging his raccoon tight.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I waited as long as I could.

(beat)

She never came.

**INT. GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli sits on the edge of a twin bed, clutching his stuffed raccoon.

Pam stands in the doorway, arms folded.

Eli stares at the floor.

**PAM**

I'm gonna call someone tomorrow,  
okay? You can stay here tonight.

He nods, eyes dull.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

(voice softening)

I know you think nobody cares. But  
I do.

She crosses the room, sits beside him. For a moment, she just watches him.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

You're a handsome boy.

Eli looks away.

She touches his hair, then brushes her hand down the back of his neck.

**Eli stiffens.**

**PAM (CONT'D)**

I... I just wanna help you. You're so  
alone, aren't you?

Her hand lingers on his shoulder.

**ELI**

(whisper)

I wanna go home.

**PAM**

(voice flat, resigned)

There ain't no home to go to.

She pulls her hand away, stands.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

Try to sleep.

She walks out, closing the door behind her.

Eli sits in the dark, listening to the click of the lock turning.

**SILENCE.**

He curls up, stuffed raccoon clutched to his chest, staring at the wall.

**INT. BABYSITTER'S LIVING ROOM - DAWN**

Pam sits in an armchair, phone in her lap. She stares blankly ahead, the TV still flickering.

She takes a long drink from a tumbler of clear liquid.

**INT. GUEST BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Eli lies awake, eyes wide, waiting.

**ELI (V.O.)**  
(small, broken)  
She's not coming back.

**SCENE 4 - INT. BABYSITTER'S GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Moonlight cuts across the bed. Eli lies on his side, facing the wall, hugging his stuffed raccoon.

The doorknob clicks.

**PAM (O.S.)**  
(whisper)  
Eli?

He doesn't move.

The door opens. **Pam** steps in wearing a long robe, silhouetted in the doorway. She closes the door quietly behind her.

**PAM (CONT'D)**  
You awake?

No answer.

She crosses the room, sits on the edge of the bed. The mattress sags under her weight.

**PAM (CONT'D)**  
I tried your mama again. No answer.

She reaches out, touches his shoulder. He flinches.



**PAM** (CONT'D)  
(soft)  
Shh...it's okay.

She rubs slow circles on his back.

Eli shuts his eyes tight.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
(sighs)  
I know you're scared. But you don't  
have to be scared of me.

Her hand slips under the blanket. Eli tenses, clutching the  
raccoon harder.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
You're such a sweet boy...

**(Eli whispers, voice cracking.)**

**ELI**  
Please...stop...

**PAM**  
It's okay...just a little touch...

**CLOSE ON Eli's face as silent tears spill over.**

**INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT**

Eli splashes water on his face.

He studies himself in the mirror—eyes glassy, distant.

**ELI (V.O.)**  
I didn't understand why she  
wouldn't come back.

**INT. BABYSITTER'S BATHROOM - LATER**

Eli sits on the closed toilet lid, knees drawn to his chest,  
shivering.

Pam stands at the sink, avoiding the mirror as she washes her  
hands.

**PAM**  
You can't tell nobody about this,  
okay?

He doesn't look at her.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
It's our secret.

She dries her hands, her expression shutting down.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
I'll...I'll call someone tomorrow to  
come get you.

She walks out, closing the door behind her.

Eli looks up—finally meeting his own gaze in the mirror.

**ELI (V.O.)**  
(small, numb)  
Nothing ever gets better.

**INT. BABYSITTER'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING**

Pam sits slumped in the armchair, phone pressed to her ear,  
her voice brittle.

**PAM**  
(into phone)  
Yeah...CPS...? I've got a boy here... His  
mother abandoned him..

**(pause)**

Her eyes flick toward the hallway.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
And... (voice drops) ...I think he  
needs to be somewhere safe.

She hangs up.

**INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT**

Pam paces, phone pressed to her ear.

**PAM**  
I already called CPS. What do you  
expect me to do—keep him?

She glances into the living room where Eli sits, hugging his  
knees.

**PAM** (CONT'D)  
Fine. Someone needs to come get  
him.

She hangs up, her face hard.

Eli watches her, tears sliding down his cheeks.

**EXT. BABYSITTER'S HOUSE - MORNING**

A CPS car idles in the driveway.

A caseworker—**WOMAN (30s)** and —walk toward the door.

Pam stands in the doorway, face blank.

**CASEWORKER WOMAN**

I'll take it from here.

Pam nods numbly, not meeting anyone's eyes.

**EXT. FRONT YARD - LATER**

A CPS worker leads Eli to a car.

Pam doesn't come outside.

Eli glances back at the house.

The porch light flicks off.

He looks down, climbing into the back seat.

**INT. CPS CAR - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli sits in the backseat, hugging the stuffed raccoon.

He stares out the window as the house recedes behind them.

**ELI (V.O.)**

(small, cold)

I don't care.

I don't care about nothing anymore.

**INT. CPS CAR - CONTINUOUS**

Eli sits in the back seat, clutching his stuffed raccoon.

His eyes are dull—he's cried himself out.

Little while later the car pulls out front of a house.

The **CPS WORKER (30s)** glances back at him, forcing a brittle smile.

**CPS WORKER**

This is your grandma and grandpa's place. You remember them, right?

Eli doesn't answer.

**EXT. GRANDPARENTS' PORCH - MOMENTS LATER**

The CPS worker leads Eli by the hand up the steps.

**GRANDMA DORIS (50s)** opens the screen door, arms folded over her chest.

**CPS WORKER**

Thank you for taking him on such short notice.

Doris doesn't move aside.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

We'll do what we can. But we're too old for this.

Eli looks up at her.

She doesn't look at him.

**CPS WORKER**

He just needs stability right now.

**SCENE 5 - INT. GRANDMA & GRANDPA'S HOUSE - DAY**

A drab living room, spotless but suffocating. Floral couch, plastic on the armrests. A giant wooden cross hangs over the TV.

**Eli** stands in the doorway, clutching a small trash bag of clothes and his stuffed raccoon.

**GRANDMA DORIS PARKER** —thin-lipped, steel-gray hair in a tight bun—stares down at him like he's something stuck to her shoe.

**GRANDPA HAROLD PARKER** —thick arms, faded tattoos—sits in his recliner, watching a preacher rant on TV.

**CPS CASEWORKER WOMAN** stands beside Eli, a clipboard hugged to her chest.

**CASEWORKER**

Thank you for taking Eli. This is just until his mother can be located and stabilized.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

(dry)  
We've heard *that* before.

CPS WORKER crouches, speaking softly.

**CPS WORKER (TO ELI)**

You'll be alright here for a while.  
Okay?

Eli stares past her, saying nothing.

She straightens, signing a clipboard.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER**

The CPS worker hands Doris a stack of forms to sign.

**CASEWORKER**

If you need anything—food stipends,  
clothing vouchers—call the number  
on this card.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

(grunts, eyes still on TV)  
He can earn his keep.

The caseworker shifts uncomfortably.

**CASEWORKER**

We'll be checking in weekly.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Mmm.

**Grandpa finally looks over.**

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Another mouth to feed.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

And another disappointment.

**CASEWORKER**

(soft)  
Eli? You can go put your things in  
the bedroom.

**CPS WORKER**

Thank you.

Eli hesitates. Doris gives him a look that says *don't argue*.

A long silence.

Finally, Doris steps back from the door.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Come on, then.

Eli shuffles inside without looking up.

He shuffles down the hallway.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Where's his things?

**CPS WORKER**

That's...all he had.

**EXT. PORCH - CONTINUOUS**

The CPS worker stands for a moment, exhaling.

She gets back in her car and drives away.

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

A tiny room with bare walls. A single bed with a thin blanket. No toys, no posters.

Eli sets his trash bag down carefully. He sits on the edge of the mattress, clutching the raccoon.

Footsteps behind him.

**GRANDMA DORIS (O.S.)**

You listen to me.

Eli looks up.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You will not bring your mother's filth into this house. You understand me?

**ELI**

(whisper)

Yes, ma'am.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

You will be quiet. You will do as you're told. You will not embarrass us in front of the neighbors.

She waits for him to nod.

**ELI**

(voice smaller)

Yes, ma'am.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Good. Supper's at six. If you're late, you don't eat.

She turns to leave, then stops.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

(soft, almost pitying)

Even your own mother don't want you. Remember that.

She closes the door.

Eli stares straight ahead, expression hollow.

**INT. GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE - SMALL BEDROOM - DAY**

Eli looks around the room, not much to see.

A single bed sits against the wall, neatly made but impersonal.

A wooden dresser.

A window with threadbare curtains that don't quite block the light.

He walks to the bed and sets his stuffed animal down carefully on the pillow.

He stands there for a moment, looking around—like he's trying to figure out if this is really happening.

**ELI (V.O.)**

They said it was my new home.

(beat)

But it didn't feel like anything.

He opens the dresser drawers one by one.

Empty.

No clothes.

No toys.

Just space waiting to be filled by someone who belongs.  
He closes the last drawer.  
Eli crosses to the window and pushes the curtain aside.  
Eli looks out the window from the bedroom for a bit.  
He lets the curtain fall back into place.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**  
I knew I wouldn't stay long.

He sits down on the edge of the bed.  
It doesn't sag under his weight.  
He wraps his arms around himself and stares at the door.

**INT. GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY**

A gray morning light spills through the window.  
Grandma Doris stands at the counter, chopping vegetables.  
Eli sits at the kitchen table, swinging his legs, voice tentative.

**ELI**  
Grandma?

**GRANDMA DORIS**  
Hmm?

Eli fidgets with the hem of his shirt.

**ELI**  
Do you know who my daddy is?

Grandma's knife stops mid-chop.  
She doesn't look at him.

**GRANDMA DORIS**  
Why you asking about that?

Eli shrugs, small.

**ELI**  
Just...wanna know.

Grandma sets the knife down and turns to face him, eyes flat.



**GRANDMA DORIS**

Your mother doesn't even know who he is.

Eli's face falls.

**ELI**

Oh.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

She don't know because she's a whore with any man who buys her a drink.

Eli's mouth opens.

He looks like he doesn't understand every word, but he feels the shame.

**ELI**

So...he don't want me?

Grandma snorts.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Probably don't even know you exist. And if he did, he wouldn't care.

Eli looks down at the table, silent.

Grandma picks up the knife and goes back to chopping, her voice dismissive.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

Eat your breakfast.

Eli doesn't touch his food.

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli lies awake, staring at the ceiling.

The hallway floorboards creak. A shadow passes by the crack under the door.

**The door creaks open.**

**UNCLE RAY (late teens)** steps in, carrying a half-empty bottle of beer. He leans against the doorframe, studying Eli.

**UNCLE RAY**

(smiles, slow)

You remember me, don't you?

Eli doesn't answer.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
Your mama never did have any sense.  
Maybe you'll do better.

He takes a swig of beer.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
G'night, Eli.

He leaves, closing the door softly behind him.

**Eli shivers, pulling the blanket to his chin.**

CUT TO:

**SCENE 6 - INT. SMALL BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli lies on the narrow bed, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling.

A clock on the dresser ticks loud in the silence.

**FOOTSTEPS** in the hallway.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

The doorknob clicks.

**The door opens.**

**Uncle Ray** stands in the doorway, a sickly smile on his face.

**UNCLE RAY**  
Couldn't sleep either, huh?

Eli pretends to be asleep.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
I know you're awake.

Eli's breathing hitches.

Uncle Ray steps inside and closes the door quietly behind him.

He sits on the edge of the bed. The mattress dips under his weight.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
 Your mama was always real friendly.  
 (leans closer)  
 I bet you are too.

Eli starts to shake.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
 Don't be scared.

He reaches out, brushing Eli's hair back from his forehead.

**(Eli whispers, voice  
 cracking.)**

**ELI**  
 Please... don't.

**UNCLE RAY**  
 (shushing)  
 It's just between us. You're my  
 special boy now.

Eli curls tighter, clutching his stuffed raccoon.

**We hear only Eli's ragged breathing.**

**CUT TO:**

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli sits cross-legged on the floor.

He flips through a **small notebook**, carefully writing a list:

"1. Randy Cole  
 2. Wayne Cole  
 3. Pam Haskins  
 4. Grandma Doris  
 5. Grandpa Harold  
 6. Uncle Ray"

He underlines Uncle Ray's name three times.

**He hides the notebook under a loose floorboard.**

**ELI (V.O.)**  
 One day.  
 And nobody's gonna hurt me ever  
 again.

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - MORNING**

Eli sits on the bed, knees drawn to his chest. The blankets are twisted and half on the floor.

He stares at the wall, blank, unblinking.

The door opens—**Grandma Doris** pokes her head in.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Breakfast.

Eli doesn't respond.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You hear me?

He slowly looks over, eyes dull.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

Suit yourself.

She closes the door again.

**ELI (V.O.)**

(quiet, flat)

They think I'm nothing.

One day, they'll see.

**EXT. BACKYARD - LATER**

Eli sits alone behind the shed, whittling a small stick into a point with a piece of broken glass.

He tests the tip with his thumb, watches a bead of blood bloom.

**UNCLE RAY (O.S.)**

Eli!

He doesn't move.

**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

(calling)

Get in here!

Eli wipes the blood on his jeans, shoves the stick into the dirt, and trudges back toward the house.

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - NIGHT (LATER)**

Eli lies in bed again.

This time he hides the sharpened stick under his pillow.

**INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY**

Afternoon light filters through lace curtains.

A candle flickers on the edge of the table, almost burned to nothing.

Eli's older brother, **Ryan (8)**, crouches nearby, striking a match.

His face is tense, daring.

He touches the flame to a crumpled napkin.

It catches immediately.

Ryan's eyes widen.

He hesitates—then bolts from the room.

**EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS**

Eli sits in the grass, tugging the wheels off a toy truck.

He doesn't see Ryan slip past him, breathless.

**INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Smoke curls toward the ceiling.

The napkin ignites the tablecloth.

Flames spread quickly across the old wood.

**INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER**

Grandma Doris comes around the corner and gasps.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Harold! Fire!

Grandpa Harold hurries in.

He grabs a dish towel, batting at the flames.

**EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS**

Eli looks up as smoke billows out the kitchen window.

His eyes go wide.

He scrambles to his feet, running toward the porch.

**INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

The fire is mostly out—black scorch marks across the table.

Doris turns, wild-eyed, as Eli appears in the doorway.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

What did you do?!

Eli shakes his head, panting.

**ELI**

I—I didn't!

Ryan stands in the corner, silent, watching.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Don't you lie to me!

She strides over, gripping Eli's shoulders hard.

**ELI**

I was outside! I swear!

Doris shakes him once, her voice rising.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

This is what happens when you let  
trash in your house.

Eli's eyes fill with tears.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Doris, enough—

**GRANDMA DORIS**

No! He's not going to ruin this  
home like his mother ruined hers!

She turns to Ryan.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

Did you see him do it?

Ryan glances at Eli—then looks away.

**RYAN**

Yeah. He was in here.

Eli's breath catches.

**ELI**

That's not true!

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Upstairs. Now.

Eli hesitates, pleading with her.

**ELI**

I didn't--

**GRANDMA DORIS**

NOW!

Eli slinks past her, wiping his face.

**INT. STAIRS - CONTINUOUS**

As he climbs, he hears Grandma's voice behind him:

**GRANDMA DORIS (O.S.)**

You never should have been born.

**INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - SMALL BEDROOM - DAY**

Eli sits on the edge of the bed, clutching his stuffed raccoon to his chest.

Tears streak his cheeks.

**Muffled voices drift up from downstairs:**

**GRANDMA DORIS (O.S.)**

He's just like her. Nothing but trouble.

**GRANDPA HAROLD (O.S.)**

He's a child, Doris.

**GRANDMA DORIS (O.S.)**

He's not my child.

Eli squeezes the raccoon tighter, pressing his forehead against it.

**GRANDMA DORIS (O.S.) (CONT'D)**

One day he'll burn this whole place  
down. You wait.

Eli's breath shudders in his chest.

His eyes drift to the window—just for a moment, he seems to  
think about climbing out.

He doesn't move.

**ELI (V.O.)**

No matter what I said, no one ever  
believed me.

(beat)

I started to wonder if they were  
right.

**INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - NIGHT**

Later.

The house is quiet.

Ryan stands in the doorway of Eli's room, holding onto the  
doorframe.

Eli lies on his side, back to him, eyes open in the dark.

Ryan shifts, uncomfortable.

He starts to speak—then stops.

He steps into the room, hovering a few feet away.

**RYAN (WHISPERING)**

...I'm sorry.

Eli doesn't respond.

Ryan waits, hoping for something.

Nothing.

Ryan's shoulders sag.

He turns and slips back into the hallway.

Eli blinks slowly.

One tear slides across the bridge of his nose onto the  
pillow.



A year later

**INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY**

Grandma Doris stands by the window, arms crossed tight over her chest.

Her jaw works as she tries not to look at Eli.

Eli sits on the sofa, small backpack in his lap.

His stuffed raccoon pokes out the top.

The **CPS WORKER** clips papers to a folder.

**CPS WORKER**

Thank you for your cooperation,  
Mrs. Parker.

Grandma doesn't answer.

The worker crouches in front of Eli, voice soft.

**CPS WORKER (CONT'D)**

You ready, Eli?

He doesn't look up.

She reaches out and gently takes his hand.

Grandma finally speaks, voice flat:

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Don't think you can come back here  
if it doesn't work out.

Eli's shoulders hunch.

He doesn't say goodbye.

The CPS worker rises and leads him toward the door.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You hear me?

Eli keeps walking.

Eli steps into the sunlight without looking back.

CUT TO:

**SCENE 7 EXT. FOSTER HOUSE #1 - DAY**

A modest ranch-style house with a patchy yard.

Plastic toys scattered in the grass.

The CPS sedan pulls to the curb.

**INT. CPS CAR - CONTINUOUS**

Eli stares out the window, hugging his raccoon.

His reflection looks pale and tired.

The CPS worker tries to smile.

**CPS WORKER**

I think you'll like it here. Mrs.  
Wells has fostered lots of kids.

Eli doesn't respond.

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - MOMENTS LATER**

**LINDA WELLS** (mid 30s) opens the screen door.

She's wearing an apron and wiping her hands on a dish towel.

Her smile is polite but tight.

**LINDA**

This must be Eli.

**CPS WORKER**

He's a good boy. Quiet.

Linda nods.

**LINDA**

Well, come on in.

The CPS worker turns to Eli.

**CPS WORKER**

You be good now, okay?

He stares past her, silent.

**INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS**

Eli steps inside, clutching his backpack.

Linda closes the door behind them.

**LINDA**

Let's get you settled.

She walks down the hallway without waiting for him to follow.

Eli stands alone for a moment in the entryway—just another house he doesn't belong to.

**EXT. FOSTER HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY**

A cheap plastic sprinkler sputters across the patchy lawn.

Eli runs through the spray, barefoot and laughing.

Droplets sparkle in the sun.

Another foster kid, chasing him around the yard.

Linda watches from the kitchen window, her expression hard to read—somewhere between annoyance and faint approval.

Eli skids to a stop, soaked and beaming.

He glances back at the house, half-expecting to be yelled at.

Linda doesn't move. She just turns away.

Eli breathes out, relieved, and goes back to playing.

**INT. FOSTER HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli lies on his small bed, a flashlight in hand.

A worn library book is propped open on the blanket.

He runs a finger along the illustrations, whispering the words to himself.

Footsteps approach.

Eli quickly clicks off the flashlight and shuts the book.

Linda opens the door, frowning.

**LINDA**

Bedtime means lights out.

Eli nods.

She glances at the book, then at him.

A long beat.

**LINDA** (CONT'D)  
You can finish the chapter  
tomorrow.

She closes the door.

Eli clicks the flashlight back on, smiling just a little.

**EXT. FOSTER HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY**

Sunlight glints off a small, secondhand bike propped against the fence.

Eli stands frozen, eyes wide.

Linda Wells watches from the porch, arms folded.

**LINDA**  
Well? It's yours. If you want it.

Eli looks up at her, unsure.

Linda sighs.

**LINDA** (CONT'D)  
One of the church ladies donated  
it. You can ride it around the  
yard.

Eli steps closer, running a hand along the handlebars.

He glances back at Linda, almost smiling.

**ELI**  
Thank you.

Linda doesn't smile back. But she nods.

Eli swings a leg over the bike and starts to pedal, wobbly at first.

He makes a slow circle around the yard, then a faster one.

For the first time in a long time—he looks happy.

**EXT. FOSTER HOME 1 - FRONT PORCH - DAY**

Eli sits on the top step, a small duffel bag beside him.

He's wearing a clean shirt and has combed his hair carefully.

Linda peeks out the screen door.

LINDA WELLS  
Are you happy to spend the night  
with your mom?

ELI  
Yea, It's been while since I seen  
her last.

LINDA WELLS  
You hungry? We can have lunch while  
you wait.

Eli shakes his head.

ELI  
She said she'd be here by eleven.

She looks at her watch.

LINDA WELLS  
Okay.

She disappears back inside.

Eli hugs his duffel bag to his chest and watches the empty  
street.

**EXT. FOSTER HOME 1 - FRONT PORCH - AFTERNOON**

The sun has shifted across the yard.

Eli sits in the same spot, arms around his knees.

The duffel bag is still beside him, untouched.

The screen door opens again.

Linda steps out, a glass of water in hand.

LINDA WELLS  
Come sit inside, Eli. It's too hot  
out here.

Eli doesn't look at her.

ELI  
She's coming.

Linda hesitates, then sits down beside him.

They sit in silence, watching the road.

A breeze stirs the dust.

Nobody comes.

**INT. FOSTER HOME - KITCHEN - EVENING**

Eli sits at the table, head resting on his folded arms.

The duffel bag is on the floor beside his chair.

Linda holds the phone to her ear, listening.

LINDA

Your son wants to see you...well  
you tell him that.

She hangs up, her eyes sad.

She sits across from Eli.

LINDA (CONT'D)

she's not coming.

Eli doesn't lift his head.

ELI

Did she say why?

Linda hesitates.

LINDA WELLS

Nope. She didn't say more.

A long silence.

ELI (V.O.)

Every time, I thought maybe this  
would be the time she showed up.

(beat)

It never was.

**INT. LINDA WELLS' HOUSE - NIGHT**

A small bedroom lit by a nightlight.

Eli lies in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Muffled voices argue in the hallway.

**LINDA (O.S.)**

—making things up again, Derrick!  
You tell me the truth!

**DERRICK (O.S.)**

He's lying!

Silence.

The door creaks open.

**LINDA** leans into the room, face tense.

**LINDA**

You think this is funny? Lying  
about my boy?

Eli shakes his head, eyes wide.

**ELI**

I'm not lying.

**LINDA**

You keep this up, you'll end up in  
a place a lot worse than here.

She closes the door.

Eli turns his face to the wall, blinking back tears.

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli (9) sits on a neatly made bed, clutching his backpack.

A small lamp glows beside him.

**Janet Miller (late 30s)** peeks in, soft-voiced.

**JANET MILLER**

You settled in okay?

Eli shrugs.

She steps inside, kneeling to his eye level.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

If you need anything, you can knock  
on our door. Even if it's the  
middle of the night.

Eli glances up, startled.

She smiles gently.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

That's what grown-ups are for.

He doesn't answer, but something in his shoulders loosens.

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - KITCHEN - MORNING**

Sunlight spills over the table.

Eli sits nervously, staring at a stack of pancakes on a bright plate.

**Tom Miller (40s)** pours syrup with an easy smile.

**TOM MILLER**

Biggest pancake stack in town. You think you can eat all that?

Eli fidgets.

**ELI**

I...I don't know.

**Janet Miller** slides into the chair beside him.

**JANET MILLER**

You can try. And if you can't, that's okay too.

Eli hesitates, then picks up his fork.

**MONTAGE:**

Eli takes a shy bite.

Tom Miller pretends to steal a pancake; Eli hides a smile.

Janet Miller ruffles his hair as she pours more juice.

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Rain taps gently at the window.

Eli lies in bed, eyes wide open.

A storm rumbles in the distance.

**Soft knock.**

Janet Miller peeks in, holding a small flashlight.



**JANET MILLER**

Thought you might like this for the thunder.

She sets the flashlight on his nightstand.

Eli stares at her.

**ELI**

What if...what if it gets loud?

She steps closer.

**JANET MILLER**

Then you come knock on our door.  
Anytime.

He studies her face, looking for any sign she doesn't mean it.

He doesn't find one.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

I promise.

She tucks the blanket around his shoulders.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

Good night, Eli.

She switches off the lamp, leaving only the soft glow of the flashlight.

Eli closes his eyes, breathing steady for once.

**EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY**

Late afternoon sun slants across the quiet block.

A few other foster kids gather in the street, chalk bases marking the field.

Eli (9) stands near the curb, hands shoved in his pockets, watching uncertainly.

**Tom Miller (40s)** carries an old red kickball under one arm.

**TOM MILLER**

You hanging back for a reason?

Eli shrugs, eyes on the pavement.

**TOM MILLER (CONT'D)**

Well, that's no good. We can't play  
with an empty team. Come on.

He tosses the ball to Eli.

Eli catches it, surprised by the easy smile on the man's  
face.

**TOM MILLER (CONT'D)**

You look like you've got a good  
leg. Let's find out.

Eli glances around, then nods, just a little.

**EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - LATER**

Kids are scattered across makeshift bases, chattering and  
laughing.

Tom Miller kneels, rolling the ball toward home plate.

**TOM MILLER**

Alright, Eli—show us what you've  
got!

Eli runs up and kicks.

The ball soars over the second baseman's head.

**FOSTER KID**

Whoa! Nice one!

Eli sprints to first, grinning—pure, unselfconscious joy.

Tom Miller claps his hands.

**TOM MILLER**

Attaboy!

Eli looks back, breathing hard.

He can't stop smiling.

**EXT. FRONT YARD - SUNSET**

The game has wound down.

Kids drift home.

Tom Miller sits on the porch steps, wiping dust from the  
ball.

Eli lingers at the edge of the yard, not quite ready to go inside.

Tom Miller glances up.

**TOM MILLER**

You did good today.

Eli ducks his head, shy.

**ELI**

Thanks.

A long beat.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

Can we play again tomorrow?

Tom Miller nods, smiling.

**TOM MILLER**

Absolutely.

Eli's face brightens.

He picks up the ball, cradling it in his arms.

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

The small lamp on the dresser glows warmly.

Eli (9) sits cross-legged on the bed in clean pajamas.

His stuffed Raccoon rests against the pillow.

Janet Miller leans in the doorway, arms folded, watching him with a tired smile.

**JANET MILLER**

Big day, huh?

Eli nods, looking down at his hands.

She walks over and smooths the blanket over his legs.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

Did you have fun?

Eli glances up, searching her face.

**ELI**

Yeah.  
(quiet)  
A lot.

Janet Miller brushes his hair back from his forehead.

**JANET MILLER**

Good. You deserve that.

He doesn't know what to say, so he just looks at her, blinking back tears he doesn't quite understand.

She stands, switching off the lamp.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

Sleep tight, Eli.

She leaves the door cracked open a few inches.

Eli lies back against the pillow, pulling the blanket to his chin.

For the first time in a long while, he lets his eyes drift closed without fear.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought maybe this time...

(beat)

Maybe this time it would stay good.

**EXT. FOSTER HOME 2 - FRONT YARD - DAY**

Colorful streamers flutter in the breeze.

A long folding table is covered in bright plates, cupcakes, and a big cake that reads:

**HAPPY 10TH BIRTHDAY ELI**

A few other kids run around the yard, wearing party hats.

Janet Miller and Tom Miller move back and forth, carrying pitchers of lemonade and bowls of chips.

Eli (10) sits on the porch steps, his small hands folded in his lap.

He's wearing a paper crown.

His eyes are fixed on the street.

**JANET MILLER (O.S.)**

Honey, you want to come pick a  
cupcake?

Eli shakes his head without turning around.

**EXT. MAILBOX - LATER**

A cluster of balloons bobs in the breeze, tied to the mailbox.

Tom Miller checks up and down the road again—nothing but empty pavement.

He sighs and walks back toward the house.

**EXT. FRONT YARD - LATER**

The kids are gathered around the cake, giggling.

Janet Miller lights the candles.

**JANET MILLER**

Okay, birthday boy—come make a  
wish!

Eli stands, walks over slowly.

He glances one last time toward the street.

Still no car.

Janet Miller kneels next to him, gentle.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

It's okay, Eli. You can still wish  
for anything you want.

Eli swallows hard.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I wished she would show up.

(beat)

I wished she would remember me.

He blows out the candles.

**INT. FOSTER HOME - LIVING ROOM - EVENING**

The decorations are still up, though a little sagging now.

Unopened gifts sit in a pile.

Eli sits alone on the sofa, picking the edge of a paper plate.

The house is quiet except for the ticking of a clock.

**ELI (V.O.)**

She didn't call.

(beat)

She never even called.

DISSOLVE TO:

(O.S.) Text: A Few weeks later

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

In bedroom. Soft lamplight. A small stack of books beside the bed.

Eli sits cross-legged, hugging a pillow.

**Janet Miller (late 30s)** kneels in front of him, voice calm.

**JANET MILLER**

Honey...can you tell me what happened?

Eli shakes his head.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

Was it something he did?

Eli won't meet her eyes.

**JANET MILLER (CONT'D)**

It's okay to tell me. You're safe here.

A long beat.

**ELI (WHISPERS)**

He scared me.

**JANET MILLER**

Alright. That's enough. I promise—he won't be back.

She puts a hand on his shoulder.

Eli flinches, then lets her hand rest there.

CUT TO:

**INT. SMALL THERAPY ROOM - DAY**

Eli (10) sits on the floor, rolling a toy car back and forth.

**THERAPIST (late 20s)** sits nearby, voice soft.

**THERAPIST**

When you're ready to talk, I'll  
listen.

Eli keeps his eyes on the toy.

**THERAPIST (CONT'D)**

I know how it feels to be hurt by  
people who should love you.

Eli's hand freezes.

**ELI**

No, No you don't.

He doesn't look up again.

JUMP CUT TO:

Text: A few weeks later.

**INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE - DAY**

Warm lamplight. A small tray of toys and crayons sits on a  
low table.

Eli (10) sits cross-legged in a soft chair, picking at the  
hem of his sleeve.

His **THERAPIST** sits across from him, notebook balanced on her  
knee.

**THERAPIST**

...so when you think about all the  
places you've lived, can you tell  
me which one felt the scariest?

Eli shrugs, eyes on the floor.

**THERAPIST** (CONT'D)

It's okay if you don't want to say  
it out loud. You can draw it, or—

Eli lifts his hand, interrupting her quietly.

**ELI**

Can we...?

He hesitates, searching for the words.

**THERAPIST**

Can we what, Eli?

Eli takes a slow breath.

**ELI**

Before I have to go back to the  
foster house...could we...talk about  
something good?

The Therapist's eyes soften.

**THERAPIST**

Something good.

Eli nods.

**THERAPIST** (CONT'D)

Alright. What would you like to  
talk about?

Eli fidgets, then looks up at her.

**ELI**

Maybe...what it's like when people...  
stay.

(beat)

When they don't leave.

The Therapist blinks, her throat tightening.

**THERAPIST**

Okay.

She sets her notebook aside.

**THERAPIST** (CONT'D)

Let's talk about that.

Eli sits a little straighter, relief flickering across his  
face.



**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - KITCHEN - EVENING**

Warm light glows over the table. Janet Miller dries dishes while Eli (10) sits nearby, picking at the edge of a placemat.

He clears his throat, voice small.

**ELI**

Miss Janet?

She glances over her shoulder, smiling.

**JANET**

Yes, sweetheart?

He hesitates, working up the courage.

**ELI**

Do you...know who my daddy is?

Janet sets the dish towel aside, her face softening.

**JANET**

What makes you ask that tonight?

Eli shrugs, eyes on the table.

**ELI**

I just...I thought maybe you saw it.  
In the papers they have. About me.

Janet pulls out the chair across from him and sits down.

**JANET**

I did look through your case file  
when you came here. Just to know  
how to help you.

Eli looks up, hopeful.

**ELI**

Did it say his name?

Janet shakes her head gently.

**JANET**

No, honey. It didn't. It just said  
"father unknown."

Eli's mouth turns down. He swallows hard.

**ELI**

So nobody knows?

Janet reaches across the table, taking his small hand in hers.

**JANET**

Nobody put it on paper. But that  
doesn't mean you don't belong here.

Eli studies her face, trying to believe her.

**ELI**

Do you think he woulda wanted me?

Janet's eyes shine, and she squeezes his hand.

**JANET**

I think any man who knew you  
would've been proud to be your  
daddy.

A long silence. Eli blinks back tears.

He nods, not trusting his voice.

CUT TO:

**INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY**

A long wooden table. The **CPS SUPERVISOR (40s)** sits across from the **SYMPATHETIC JUDGE (50s)**, paperwork spread between them.

The Judge flips through a thick file, her brow furrowed.

**JUDGE**

According to these reports, this  
boy has been removed multiple  
times...yet the abuse continued in  
placements approved by this agency.

The CPS Supervisor shifts uncomfortably.

**CPS SUPERVISOR**

We...recognize there were lapses. But  
all the appropriate steps were  
taken within policy.

The Judge fixes her with a steady, tired gaze.

**JUDGE**

Policy.

She turns another page.

**JUDGE (CONT'D)**

He was sexually assaulted in at least two foster homes. His mother has at least attempted to meet her case plan.

The CPS Supervisor swallows.

**CPS SUPERVISOR**

With respect, Your Honor, reunification is not recommended.

The Judge sighs, removing her glasses.

**JUDGE**

If the state cannot guarantee his safety in your care...why should I believe remaining in the system will be any better for him than going home?

A long silence settles in the room.

The CPS Supervisor doesn't answer.

**INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LATER DAY**

Sunlight glows through tall windows.

A **SYMPATHETIC JUDGE** sits at the bench, reviewing a file.

Eli (12) sits next to his **court-appointed advocate**, legs swinging nervously.

Foster Mom sits behind him, hands folded tight.

Across the aisle, **Denise** fidgets in a borrowed dress, eyes down.

**JUDGE**

Mrs. Parker, the court has reviewed your compliance with your case plan —attending parenting classes, maintaining sobriety...

Denise nods, voice small.

**DENISE**

Yes, Your Honor.

The judge studies Eli over her glasses.

**JUDGE**

I believe reunification with your mother is in your best interest.

Eli's eyes widen.

**ADVOCATE**

Your Honor, with respect—Eli has been thriving in his current placement. He's finally stable.

**JUDGE**

Children belong with their families when at all possible.

She turns to Eli.

**JUDGE (CONT'D)**

Would you like to go home with your mom, Eli?

Eli looks down at his shoes.

A long, heavy beat.

**ELI (SMALL VOICE)**

...I don't know.

The judge smiles gently, mistaking his fear for confusion.

**JUDGE**

I promise this is going to be a fresh start.

**INT. FOSTER HOME 2 - BEDROOM - DAY**

Eli (12) stands in the middle of the room, hugging his stuffed raccoon.

His small suitcase waits by the door.

**JANET MILLER** kneels in front of him.

**JANET MILLER**

You remember what I told you? If you ever need anything...anything at all...you can call me.

Her voice breaks.

Eli stares at the floor, silent

FADE TO:

**SCENE 8 INT. SMALL APARTMENT - DAY**

The door swings open. Denise (Late 30s) ushers Eli (12) inside.

The living room is plain but clean—no bottles on the counters, no ashtrays overflowing.

Eli steps carefully across the threshold, as if expecting something bad to happen.

Denise sets his bag down and kneels in front of him.

**DENISE**

I know it wasn't good before.

Eli studies her face.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

I'm trying. I promise you I'm trying.

He doesn't answer, but he doesn't look away either.

She smooths his hair back and forces a hopeful smile.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

How about grilled cheese for lunch?

Eli nods, almost smiling.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

A tiny kitchen table is set with two plates of spaghetti.

Eli eats quietly while Denise puts on her waitress clothes and then flips through a work schedule.

**DENISE**

I'm gonna be working dinner shifts now. But the lady next door said she can check on you if I'm late.

Eli nods, twirling noodles on his fork.

Denise looks up at him, tentative.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

You okay here? With me?

Eli hesitates—then nods again.

She lets out a small breath, like she's been holding it for years.

**DENISE** (CONT'D)

I'm glad you're home.

Eli looks down quickly, trying not to smile too big.

**EXT. SMALL PARK - AFTERNOON**

Eli pedals a secondhand bike slowly along the sidewalk.

Denise sits on a bench nearby, wearing her work uniform.

She watches him loop around and waves when he looks back.

Eli stops in front of her, breathless and flushed with happiness.

**ELI**

Did you see how fast I went?

Denise smiles—truly smiles—and nods.

**DENISE**

I saw. You're getting so strong.

Eli beams, pushing the hair off his forehead.

**ELI**

Can we come back tomorrow?

Denise's face softens.

**DENISE**

Sure, baby. We can come back tomorrow.

Eli pedals off again, and for just a moment, everything feels like it could be okay.

**INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY**

Eli (13) stands at his locker, head down, stuffing books into his backpack.

A group of boys passes, laughing and shoving each other. One of them shoves Eli's shoulder.

**BOY**

Watch it, Parker.

Eli doesn't look up.

**VOICE (O.S.)**

Hey—leave him alone.

The boys keep walking.

Eli glances up. **Aaron Mitchell (12)** is leaning against the locker across the hall, arms folded.

**AARON**

You gonna let them talk to you like that every day?

Eli shrugs, voice quiet.

**ELI**

Doesn't matter.

Aaron pushes off the locker, steps closer.

**AARON**

Yeah, it does.

They look at each other a beat—an unspoken understanding.

**EXT. SMALL TOWN BACK ROADS - AFTERNOON**

Two bikes coast down a dusty road.

Eli pedals fast, hair whipping in the wind.

Aaron rides beside him, grinning.

They stop near an old railroad bridge, hearts pounding.

Aaron jumps off his bike, arms spread wide.

**AARON**

Best part of the day.

Eli nods, out of breath, but smiling.

**AARON (CONT'D)**

Nobody yelling. Nobody hitting.  
Just...this.

Eli looks out at the empty fields, and for a moment, he's free.

**ELI**

Yeah. Just this.

**EXT. ELI'S APARTMENT - EVENING**

The porch light flickers. Eli and Aaron walk their bikes up the path.

From inside, Denise's voice slurs, loud and angry.

Aaron glances at Eli, uneasy.

**AARON**

You sure you don't wanna stay at my place tonight?

Eli keeps his eyes on the ground.

**ELI**

I'm sure.

A crash inside. Eli flinches.

Aaron puts a hand on his shoulder.

**AARON**

You don't gotta lie to me about her.

Eli's throat tightens. He doesn't answer.

Denise yanks open the front door, hair disheveled, beer bottle in hand.

**DENISE**

Where the hell you been?

Eli steps forward, voice small.

**ELI**

Just riding bikes.

She glares at Aaron.

**DENISE**

Go home. He's got chores.

Aaron doesn't move.

**AARON**

I'll see you tomorrow, okay?

Eli nods, not looking back as he disappears into the dark house.



**EXT. CREEK - DAY**

Eli and Aaron sit side by side on the bank, feet dangling in the water.

A tackle box lies open between them.

Aaron casts his line, watching the ripples spread.

**AARON**

You ever think about running away?

Eli doesn't answer right away.

**ELI**

Yeah. All the time.

**AARON**

If I had somewhere to go, I would.

Eli picks up a smooth stone, turning it in his hand.

**ELI**

I don't think it matters where I go. I'd still be me.

Aaron looks at him, sad but understanding.

**AARON**

I'd still come with you.

Eli almost smiles.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Eli (13) sits on the couch, homework spread across his lap.

The TV blares some late-night talk show.

The front door opens, and **Denise** stumbles inside.

Her hair is messy. She reeks of cheap liquor.

Eli doesn't look up.

Denise drops her purse on the floor and sways toward the kitchen.

**DENISE**

What're you lookin' at?

Eli shakes his head.

**ELI**

Nothing.

She disappears into the kitchen. A bottle clinks against the counter.

Eli stares at the door, his jaw clenched.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - DAY**

A bare refrigerator.

Eli (14) stands in front of it, staring at the empty shelves.

He closes it quietly, as if making no sound will keep the day from getting worse.

**EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - LATER**

Eli sits cross-legged by the side wall, a plastic bag with a loaf of bread and peanut butter in his lap.

He eats in small bites, eyes scanning the parking lot.

**ELI (V.O.)**

You learn to stop asking.

(beat)

You learn to do it yourself.

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli (14) lies awake, staring at the ceiling.

Muffled yelling from the living room bleeds through the walls —Denise arguing with someone on the phone.

His eyes drift to a kitchen knife lying on the floor, where he used it to pry open a can earlier.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I used to think maybe I'd run away.

(beat)

Then I started thinking about other ways to make it stop.

His gaze lingers on the knife.

**EXT. WOODED CLEARING - DAY**

Eli (16) stands in a tight cluster of trees, a paper target pinned to a stump.

He grips a small .22 rifle, breath steady.

**POP.**

A hole punches through the target's center.

**MONTAGE:**

Eli reloading a clip with calm, practiced hands.

Eli cleaning the rifle in his room by lamplight.

Eli at a pawn shop counter, buying a hunting knife.

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli sits at his desk, a spiral notebook open.

He writes slowly:

**Randy Griffin. Wayne Griffin. Linda Wells. Derrick Wells.  
Denise Parker. Ray Parker. Caleb. Pam Haskins.**

He underlines Denise's name twice.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Eli (18) sits at a scarred kitchen table.

A single cupcake with a candle flickers in front of him—something he bought himself.

The wax drips down as he waits.

**KNOCK KNOCK.**

Denise (early-40s) pushes the door open without meeting his eyes.

She looks older than her years—tired, lined, worn down.

Eli doesn't smile.

**ELI**

You forgot.

Denise sets her purse down, sighs.

**DENISE**

I'm here now.

Eli blows out the candle in silence.

He picks at the cupcake without eating it.

**ELI**

I don't want anything from you.

Denise frowns, defensive.

**DENISE**

I didn't come to fight.

Eli looks up, eyes shining but angry.

**ELI**

Then tell me something real.

(beat)

Tell me who he is.

Denise glances away, her voice small.

**DENISE**

Eli...Damn it, I told you. I don't know.

**ELI**

You must have some idea.

A long, heavy silence.

Denise opens her purse, rifling through it.

She pulls out a crumpled napkin and a pen.

Eli watches her warily.

She writes slowly, her hand unsteady.

When she finishes, she pushes the napkin across the table.

**DENISE**

These are the ones I...was seeing around that time.

Eli stares at the napkin.

Four names in shaky handwriting.

Insert: Four male names.

**ELI**

That's it?

Denise's voice is flat.

**DENISE**

That's all I got.

Eli picks up the napkin, reading the names over and over.

He looks up at her, his voice hoarse.

**ELI**

I just wanted one thing that was  
true.

Denise swallows hard, but she doesn't apologize.

He crumples the napkin in his fist and stands.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

You can go now.

Denise doesn't argue.

She picks up her purse and walks to the door.

Before she leaves, she hesitates—just a moment.

Then she goes.

Eli unfolds the napkin, smoothing it out with shaking hands.

He reads the names again, as if willing them to mean  
something.

FADE OUT.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

A phone book thuds onto the kitchen table.

Eli (18) flips it open with shaking hands.

**CLOSE ON:**

His finger tracing the column of names—matching each to the  
napkin in his pocket.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - LATER**

Eli holds an old cordless phone to his ear.

**ELI**

Hi...um...is there a Robert Hanley  
there?

(pause)

Oh. Okay. Thank you.

He hangs up, crossing a name off his list.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT**

A growing stack of notepaper, each page headed with a  
different name.

Addresses. Phone numbers. Notes scribbled in the margins:

"Might be him?" "Age matches?" "No answer."

**EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY**

Eli stands across the road from a tidy brick house.

He holds a slip of paper, staring at the address.

He doesn't move to approach—just watches the windows,  
searching for something familiar in strangers.

**EXT. SMALL TOWN MAIN STREET - ANOTHER DAY**

Eli peers through the window of a hardware store.

A middle-aged man stocks shelves inside.

Eli's breath fogs the glass as he studies the man's face,  
trying to see himself in it.

**EXT. TRAILER PARK - DUSK**

Eli stands outside a rusting trailer.

No lights inside.

He steps up to the door, raises his hand to knock—then lowers  
it.

**INT. PAYPHONE BOOTH - NIGHT**

Eli sits hunched in the narrow space, phone to his ear.

**ELI (QUIET)**

Did you...ever know Denise Parker?

(pause)

Yeah. Okay. Sorry.

He hangs up and closes his eyes.

**INT. SMALL APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Eli sits at the table, the list in front of him.

Every name has a line through it.

He picks up the napkin again, smoothing it flat one last time.

FADE TO:

**SCENE 9 - EXT. GRANDMA & GRANDPA'S HOUSE - DAY**

A rusted sedan idles at the curb. The back door opens.

**Eli (19)** steps out—taller, gaunt, in a worn hoodie and jeans.

He slings a duffel bag over his shoulder.

His eyes flick up to the porch.

**Grandma Doris (70s now)** stands with arms folded, face pinched and tired.

**GRANDPA HAROLD (70s)** sits in the same old recliner just inside the doorway, watching silently.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

(voice flat)

Well. Look what the cat dragged back.

**ELI**

Hi, Grandma.

She doesn't answer.

He steps past her into the house.

**INT. SMALL BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli drops the duffel onto the same bed he slept in as a boy.

He notices **the floorboard he used to hide his notebook**. He kneels, pries it up—

**Nothing there.**

He sets the board back in place.

**EXT. WOODED CLEARING BEHIND THE HOUSE - DAY**

Eli sits on a fallen log in a small clearing behind Grandma and Grandpa's property.

A **pack of cigarettes** and a **cheap Bic lighter** sit beside him.

He picks up a cigarette, puts it between his lips.

His hands tremble as he strikes the lighter.

The flame sputters—he tries again.

**It catches.**

He lights the tip, sucks in smoke, coughs violently.

He doubles over, retching.

**But he doesn't drop the cigarette.**

**CLOSE ON Eli's face:**

Eyes watering, face red, but determined.

He takes another drag.

**FOOTSTEPS** crunch behind him.

He tenses, whipping around.

**UNCLE RAY** stands at the edge of the clearing, arms folded.

**UNCLE RAY**

(cold amusement)

You think you're a man now?

Eli doesn't answer. He takes another puff, steadier this time.

Uncle Ray steps closer, looming over him.



**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

One day you'll thank me. You needed toughening up.

Eli stares at him, smoke drifting from his nose.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I hope you die.

Uncle Ray smirks, ruffles Eli's hair. Eli flinches away.

**UNCLE RAY**

Don't let Doris catch you smoking.  
She'll skin you alive.

He turns and leaves, laughing under his breath.

**EXT. WOODED CLEARING - ANOTHER DAY**

Eli sits on the same log, cigarette in his mouth.

This time, **he smokes without coughing.**

His eyes are flat, old for his age.

**He looks down at the stick he once sharpened. Now, he whittles another.**

**EXT. BACKYARD - LATE AFTERNOON**

Eli sits on the back steps, smoking a cigarette.

**Uncle Ray (20s now)** walks up from the shed, carrying a beer.

**UNCLE RAY**

(smiling)

Heard you were coming back.

Eli doesn't look at him.

**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

Big man now, huh? You think that makes you safe?

Eli's jaw tightens. He takes another drag.

**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

Don't get any ideas about disrespecting this house. You know your place.

Eli exhales smoke slowly.

**ELI (QUIET, FLAT)**

Yeah. I know my place.

Uncle Ray smirks, walks back inside.

**INT. GRANDMA'S SMALL BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli lies in bed, staring at the ceiling.

**He doesn't look scared anymore. He looks...patient.**

**ELI (V.O.)**

One day soon...

All of you are gonna pay.

**INT. GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE - NIGHT**

A small, cluttered kitchen. The clock ticks loudly over the stove.

Eli (19) sits at the table, arms folded, eyes hollow.

Grandma Doris stands by the sink, scrubbing a dish so hard it squeaks.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

You think you can just show up here  
and expect a bed?

Eli doesn't answer.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Boy's too old to be looking for  
handouts.

Doris slams the dish down.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Just like your mother. Always  
needing something from somebody  
else.

Eli stares at a water stain on the table, refusing to look up.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You think we owe you a place to  
sleep because you're pitiful? We  
don't.

Eli takes a slow breath, then stands.

**ELI**

I know.

Harold shakes his head in disgust.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

You're a waste.

Eli picks up his backpack.

He looks at them one last time.

**ELI**

I won't bother you again.

He turns and walks out the back door.

**EXT. BACK YARD - CONTINUOUS**

The screen door bangs shut behind him.

Frosted grass crunches under his shoes as he crosses the yard to the road.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I'd rather freeze than stay here.

He doesn't look back.

**EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT**

Snow drifts past flickering streetlights.

Eli (19) trudges along the sidewalk, his coat too thin for the cold.

His breath comes in ragged clouds.

His eyes are dull with exhaustion.

He tries a convenience store door—locked.

Peeks into the window of a laundromat—dark.

He pulls his hood tighter around his face and keeps walking.

**EXT. ALLEY - LATE NIGHT**

Wind whips through overflowing trash cans.

A metal dumpster sits against a graffiti-tagged brick wall.

Eli climbs the side and eases himself over the edge.

He lowers into the darkness slowly, careful not to make noise.

Inside, the smell makes his eyes water.

He curls up in a corner, shivering so hard his teeth chatter.

He pulls a stack of old newspapers toward him.

They crinkle as he lays them over his body.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought if I was quiet enough...  
maybe nobody would see me.

He closes his eyes, clutching the papers to his chest like a blanket.

**EXT. ALLEY - DAWN**

Early light creeps over the rooftops.

The alley is silent except for the distant hum of traffic.

Inside the dumpster, Eli (19) slowly opens his eyes.

His breath rises in frosty puffs.

Newspapers cling to his shoulders and chest.

He pushes himself upright, joints stiff and aching.

He moves like someone twice his age.

He peeks over the rim, checking the street.

Empty.

He swings a leg over and lowers himself to the pavement.

His feet hit the ground with a dull thud.

**CLOSE ON:**

His face—blank. No fear, no sadness. Just the hollow quiet of survival.

He pulls his hood up and starts walking down the alley.

**ELI (V.O.)**

The sun came up anyway.

(beat)

Didn't mean nothing.

His footsteps echo against the brick as he disappears into the morning.

**MUSIC OVER (somber, reflective)****EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - NIGHT**

Eli (19) sits on the curb, a cardboard sign propped against his knees:

**WILL WORK FOR FOOD.**

Cars pass without slowing down.

His face is blank.

**EXT. COMMUNITY CHURCH - DAY**

Eli stands in a line that winds around the block.

Volunteers hand out paper plates piled with mashed potatoes and bread.

He takes a plate, murmurs thanks, and sits on the steps to eat alone.

**INT. FRIEND'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

A sagging couch covered in blankets.

Eli curls up on one end, hugging his backpack like a lifeline.

A party rages in the other room—music thumping, people laughing.

He stares at the ceiling, dead-eyed.

**EXT. SHELTER - MORNING**

Eli shuffles out of a brick shelter building, pulling his coat tight.

Steam rises from a Styrofoam cup in his hands.

**EXT. PARK - AFTERNOON**

A cracked sidewalk.

Eli sits cross-legged, sketching in a cheap spiral notebook.

A man drops a crumpled dollar bill in the space beside him.

Eli doesn't look up.

**EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT**

Eli stands by a dumpster, digging for cans and scraps of food.

A car pulls up to the pump.

He turns away, ashamed.

**EXT. CITY STREET - EARLY MORNING**

Eli leans against a brick wall, eyes closed.

The first light of dawn spills over him.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I stopped counting the nights.

(beat)

They were all the same.

**SCENE 10- EXT. BACK ALLEY BEHIND A CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT**

A cold drizzle falls on cracked asphalt.

**Eli (21)** sits against the brick wall, hood pulled over his face. A **small pile of crumpled newspapers** covers his legs.

He lights a cigarette with shaking hands.

His eyes are hollow.

**Footsteps approach.**

Eli tenses.

**WALTER GRADY (55)**—balding, neat beard, wearing a clean canvas jacket—stops a few feet away. He holds a plastic grocery bag.

**WALTER**

You been out here all night?

Eli says nothing.

**WALTER** (CONT'D)  
I seen you around. What's your name?

**ELI**  
Eli.

**WALTER**  
You hungry, Eli?

Eli glances up, wary but unable to hide his hunger.

Walter crouches down, holding the bag out.

**WALTER** (CONT'D)  
Sandwiches. Bottle of water. Take it.

Eli hesitates, then reaches for the bag.

**WALTER** (CONT'D)  
I'm not gonna hurt you.

Eli pulls the bag into his lap.

**EXT. SAME ALLEY - LATER**

Eli eats a sandwich in small bites. Walter sits beside him, watching traffic pass on the main street.

**WALTER**  
You got anywhere to go tonight?

Eli shakes his head.

**WALTER** (CONT'D)  
You can sleep on my couch.

Eli goes still, staring at the sidewalk.

**WALTER** (CONT'D)  
Just for tonight. Better than freezing out here.

**INT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER**

A small, neat space—lamps casting a warm glow. A mismatched couch and recliner.

Eli sits stiffly on the couch, holding the grocery bag in his lap.

Walter emerges from the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

**WALTER**

Drink. Warm you up.

Eli takes the cup without meeting his eyes.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

How old are you?

**ELI**

Twenty-one.

**WALTER**

(soft)

So young. You remind me of my nephew.

Eli sips the coffee, trying not to tremble.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

You don't gotta be scared. Nobody's gonna hurt you here.

**Eli doesn't believe that.**

**INT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT**

The TV plays low. Eli lies curled under a blanket on the couch, eyes open.

**Walter appears in the hallway, wearing only boxers.**

**WALTER**

You need anything before bed?

Eli shakes his head.

Walter's eyes drift over him.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

You sure?

Eli looks away.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

I want you to feel safe.

He takes a step closer.



**Eli's voice is flat.**

**ELI**

I'm fine.

**WALTER**

(sighs)

Alright.

He disappears back into the hallway.

Eli waits, listening to the bedroom door click shut.

**EXT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - MORNING**

Eli stands on the front stoop, smoking.

Walter leans in the doorway, mug in hand.

**WALTER**

I can help you, you know.

Eli keeps his eyes on the street.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

Food. A little cash. Place to stay..

**(beat)**

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

You just gotta be...nice to me.

**Eli closes his eyes, swallowing bile.**

**INT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Eli lies on the couch again, fully dressed.

Walter sits beside him, hand on Eli's knee.

**WALTER**

Don't act like you don't want it.  
You owe me.

Eli doesn't move.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This is all there is.  
People who take.  
People who hurt.

**SCENE 11 - INT. DIVE BAR - NIGHT**

A cheap neon sign flickers over a grimy wood-paneled bar. An old jukebox warbles an 80s country song.

**Eli (21)** sits on a cracked vinyl stool, nursing a beer. His hoodie is zipped to his chin.

He watches the ice melt in his glass, lost in thought.

**A VOICE behind him—bright, teasing.**

**AMBER (16, looks older)**

You look like you lost your best friend.

Eli glances over his shoulder.

**Amber Lewis** slides onto the stool next to him, a mischievous smile on her pretty face. She wears a black tank top and jeans, hair curling over her shoulders.

**ELI**

Just tired.

**AMBER**

Or sad. Which is it?

Eli studies her warily, unused to kindness.

**ELI**

Does it matter?

**AMBER**

(smiling)

Sure it does.

She signals the bartender.

**AMBER (CONT'D)**

(to bartender)

Two shots of Jack.

The bartender eyes her, skeptical.

**BARTENDER**

ID?

Amber leans in conspiratorially.

**AMBER**

You know me, Bobby. C'mon.

He rolls his eyes and pours the shots.

Amber slides one toward Eli.

**AMBER** (CONT'D)

To bad days.

Eli hesitates, then picks up the glass.

They clink. Drink.

**INT. DIVE BAR - LATER**

Eli and Amber sit in a booth, a pile of empty glasses between them.

Amber leans forward, chin propped on her hand.

**AMBER**

You always this serious?

Eli rubs his eyes, embarrassed by how much he wants to stay here with her.

**ELI**

Most of the time.

**AMBER**

What's your name?

**ELI**

Eli.

**AMBER**

Amber.

She holds out her hand. Eli takes it. For a moment, neither lets go.

**EXT. DIVE BAR PARKING LOT - LATER**

Amber leans against Eli's shoulder, both of them tipsy.

**AMBER**

You got somewhere to be?

**ELI**

Nowhere important.

She turns her face up to his.

**AMBER**

Good.

She kisses him—slow, soft.

Eli stiffens, then melts into it.

**EXT. DIVE BAR PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli watches her walk away to a car idling at the curb.

She turns back, smiling.

**AMBER**

See you Friday?

**ELI**

Yeah.

He can't stop smiling as he watches her go.

**INT. CAB - NIGHT**

City lights blur past the windows.

Eli (21) leans back in the worn seat, a small, contented smile on his face.

He looks out the window, thinking about Amber—something hopeful in his expression.

The **CAB DRIVER (50s)** glances at him in the rearview mirror.

**CAB DRIVER**

You look like you had a good night,  
son.

Eli chuckles softly.

**ELI**

Yeah. I guess I did.

A beat of comfortable silence.

The cab driver studies Eli again, squinting.

**CAB DRIVER**

Say...you from around here?

**ELI**

Mostly. I been all over.

**CAB DRIVER**

What's your people's name?

**ELI**

Parker. Denise Parker was my mom.

The cab driver's brows lift.

**CAB DRIVER**

Denise...sure. Yeah, I remember her.  
Lord, it's been years.

Eli leans forward, pulse quickening.

**ELI**

You ever know who my dad was?

The cab driver hesitates, eyeing him in the mirror.

**CAB DRIVER**

Son...I do.

Eli's breath catches.

**ELI**

You do?

The cab driver nods slowly.

**CAB DRIVER**

Yeah. You look just like him.

Eli swallows, voice soft but urgent.

**ELI**

Who is he? What's his name?

The cab driver shifts his hands on the wheel.

**CAB DRIVER**

I ain't seen him in a while, but...  
next time I do, I'll tell him you  
been asking.

Eli's heart thuds in his chest.

**ELI**

Would you? Tell him...tell him his  
son's looking for him.

The cab driver meets his gaze in the mirror—something almost  
kind there.

**CAB DRIVER**

I will, son. I promise.

Eli leans back in the seat, staring out the window again—somewhere between hope and disbelief.

**INT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Eli stands inside the doorway, still flushed from the kiss.

Walter watches him from the recliner, frowning.

**WALTER**

Where you been?

**ELI**

Out.

**WALTER**

You can't be out all hours, Eli.

Eli meets his gaze for the first time.

**ELI**

I'm not yours.

He heads for the couch, leaving Walter glowering.

**INT. CAB - DAY**

The cab idles at a gas station.

The **CAB DRIVER (50s)** stands by the open window of an old pickup truck.

Inside, a grizzled man in his 40s—**MARK SHEPHERD**—smokes a cigarette, watching the cars pass.

**CAB DRIVER**

Mark...you remember Denise Parker?

Mark stiffens, his eyes narrowing.

**MARK**

Yeah. Why?

The cab driver glances around, voice low.

**CAB DRIVER**

She had a boy. About twenty-one now. Looks just like you.

Mark exhales, not meeting his eyes.

**MARK**

A lot of boys look like me.

**CAB DRIVER**

No. This one's yours. And he's been looking for you.

Mark doesn't respond. He just stares straight ahead.

The cab driver shakes his head, sighing.

**CAB DRIVER (CONT'D)**

Kid's got nothing. Been bounced around his whole damn life. Least you could do is meet him.

Mark flicks ash out the window, saying nothing.

**SCENE 12 - EXT. RIVERBANK - LATE AFTERNOON**

Amber and Eli sit together on a blanket spread over grass.

Sunlight glitters on the slow-moving river.

A **small cooler** sits between them, half-empty beer bottles inside.

Amber has her bare feet in the water, jeans rolled up.

**AMBER**

(smiling)

I used to come here when I was a kid. Pretend I was running away.

**ELI**

I used to do that too.

(beat)

Wish I'd kept going.

Amber turns to look at him, reading the heaviness behind his words.

**AMBER**

You don't have to tell me.

**ELI**

(surprised)

What?

**AMBER**

Whatever it is you're running from. You don't have to say it.

(MORE)

AMBER (CONT'D)

(soft)

I already know it's bad.

Eli feels a hot rush of something like gratitude—or longing.

ELI

You don't act like everybody else.

AMBER

Maybe I'm just better at  
pretending.

She splashes him with water. Eli laughs—a real, unguarded sound.

#### EXT. RIVERBANK - DUSK

They lie side by side on the blanket, hands intertwined.

Amber rolls onto her side, tracing Eli's jawline with her fingertip.

AMBER

You ever feel like...if you don't  
grab something good when it comes,  
you'll never get another chance?

Eli nods, not trusting himself to speak.

AMBER (CONT'D)

(whisper)

I don't want to wait anymore.

She kisses him.

Eli kisses her back, tentative at first, then with growing need.

#### INT. DIVE BAR PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Eli leans against Amber's car, both of them flushed and breathless from making out in the backseat.

ELI

I don't want this to end.

AMBER

It doesn't have to.

She kisses him again, slow and deliberate.



**AMBER (CONT'D)**

Come over to my place.

Eli hesitates—he's never been invited anywhere.

**ELI**

You sure?

**AMBER**

I'm sure.

**INT. AMBER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT**

A small, messy room—posters on the walls, a string of Christmas lights framing the headboard.

Eli sits on the edge of her bed, hands shaking.

Amber stands in front of him, unbuttoning her shirt.

**AMBER**

It's okay.

Eli lifts his eyes to her face.

**ELI**

I'm scared.

**AMBER**

Me too.

She climbs into his lap, kissing him again.

DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. AMBER'S HOUSE - LATE NIGHT**

Eli steps out onto the porch, pulling his hoodie over his head.

He can't stop smiling.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Maybe this is what it feels like to  
be wanted.

He walks down the steps into the darkness.

**EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT**

Streetlights glow over cracked sidewalks.

Eli (21) walks slowly along the curb, hands shoved in his coat pockets, eyes hollow.

A cab pulls up beside him and stops.

The window rolls down.

**CAB DRIVER (GENTLE)**

Hey, son.

Eli turns, startled.

**ELI**

Hey. You working tonight?

**CAB DRIVER**

I been looking for you.

Eli frowns.

**ELI**

Why?

The cab driver holds out a slip of paper.

**CAB DRIVER**

I told your dad about you. He didn't know. Not really.

Eli just stares, not breathing.

**CAB DRIVER (CONT'D)**

He said if you wanted to come by... he'd see you.

Eli takes the paper, hands shaking.

**ELI**

This is real?

**CAB DRIVER**

It's real. Right now, he's home. 512 Maple. You go on.

Eli clutches the paper to his chest, trying to speak—but no words come.

**CAB DRIVER (CONT'D)**

Go on, son. Don't wait too long.

The cab rolls away, leaving Eli standing alone under the streetlight.

**EXT. SMALL HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli stands on the porch of a modest bungalow.

He reads the address one more time, heart racing.

He raises his hand—and knocks.

A long moment.

The porch light flicks on.

**MARK SHEPHERD** opens the door.

He looks older than Eli expected. Weathered. Tired. But his eyes are the same shape as Eli's.

They stare at each other in silence.

**MARK**

...Eli.

Eli swallows, voice cracking.

**ELI**

Yeah.

Mark looks down, then back up, searching Eli's face.

**MARK**

You...you look just like your mother.

Eli tries to smile, but it wobbles and fails.

**ELI**

I don't...know what I'm supposed to say.

Mark opens the door wider.

**MARK**

You don't have to say anything. You wanna come in?

Eli hesitates—then nods.

He steps inside.

They hug tightly.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, heart hammering in his chest.

**ELI (V.O.)**

It doesn't matter what anybody  
thinks.

(beat)

This is mine.

**SCENE 13 - EXT. PARKING LOT BEHIND THE DIVE BAR - EVENING**

Amber sits on the tailgate of her friend's truck, hugging her  
knees to her chest.

Eli approaches, hands shoved in his pockets.

She looks up. Her eyes are puffy from crying.

**ELI**

(soft)

What's wrong?

**AMBER**

I have to tell you something.

He steps closer, heart sinking.

**ELI**

Okay.

Amber wipes her face with the heel of her hand.

**AMBER**

I'm pregnant.

Eli goes still. The air seems to vanish.

**ELI**

Are you sure?

**AMBER**

I took three tests.

He rubs his jaw, mind spinning.

**ELI**

I...I don't know what to say.

**AMBER**

Say you won't leave.

He meets her eyes.

**ELI**

I won't leave.

Amber closes her eyes, a small sob escaping her throat.

**EXT. DIVE BAR - LATER**

Eli and Amber stand beside her car.

She's calmer now, voice steadier.

**AMBER**

There's...there's something else.

Eli tenses.

**AMBER (CONT'D)**

I'm only sixteen.

**ELI**

What?

**AMBER**

I turn seventeen in a few months.

Eli takes a step back, dizzy.

**ELI**

You said you were nineteen.

**AMBER**

I know. I lied. But I love you. I swear.

Eli covers his face with both hands, breathing hard.

**ELI**

Oh my God.

**AMBER**

Please don't hate me.

Amber's face crumples.

**AMBER (CONT'D)**

I didn't mean to ruin your life.

Eli lowers his hands, his expression blank.

**ELI**

It's already ruined.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, cigarette dangling from his lips.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I should have known. Nothing good  
ever stays.

**EXT. DIVE BAR - DAWN**

Eli stands alone in the parking lot, watching the sun rise  
over the empty street.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought maybe I could be more  
than what they made me.

(beat)

I was wrong.

**SCENE 14 - EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, hood pulled over his head.  
His cigarette glows in the dark.

**FLASHING RED AND BLUE LIGHTS** wash over him.

Two patrol cars slide to a stop.

**OFFICER #1 (O.S.)**

Eli Parker! Hands where we can see  
them!

Eli freezes, heart hammering.

He raises his hands.

**OFFICER #2**

Turn around. On your knees.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels on the cracked pavement.  
Cold metal cuffs snap around his wrists.

**OFFICER #1**

You are under arrest for statutory  
rape of a minor. You have the right  
to remain silent...

Eli stares straight ahead, numb.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I knew it. I knew nothing good  
could be mine.

**INT. POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT**

Eli sits at a metal table, hands cuffed to a ring bolted into the surface.

A flickering fluorescent bulb buzzes overhead.

**DETECTIVE RAMIREZ (50s)** leans across from him, voice low and calm.

**RAMIREZ**

She says she's sixteen. You admit you knew that?

**ELI**

(hoarse)

She told me she was nineteen.

**RAMIREZ**

You didn't check? No ID? Nothing?

Eli looks down at the table.

**ELI**

She was at the bar, when I first met her. How was I suppose to know she was under age

**INT. COURTROOM - DAY**

Eli stands beside his **Public Defender**, wrists cuffed. His face is blank, like he's already dead inside.

**AMBER (16)** sits in the gallery, weeping into her mother's shoulder.

She tries to look at Eli, but her mother pulls her head down.

The **PROSECUTOR** reads from a prepared statement.

**PROSECUTOR**

...multiple sexual encounters with a minor under the age of consent...

Eli doesn't flinch.

**INT. COURTROOM - LATER**

**JUDGE MEREDITH COLLINS (60s)** addresses Eli, voice stern.

**JUDGE COLLINS**

Mr. Parker, this court recognizes the trauma you suffered as a child. But trauma does not excuse criminal conduct. You will serve fifteen to twenty years in the custody of the Department of Corrections.

Eli swallows hard.

He doesn't look at anyone.

**JUDGE COLLINS (CONT'D)**

May God have mercy on your soul.

**EXT. COURTHOUSE - DAY**

Eli is led down the steps in shackles.

News cameras flash.

Reporters shout questions he can't hear over the roaring in his ears.

**INT. PRISON TRANSPORT VAN - DRIVING**

Eli sits shackled to a bench seat.

His eyes are dry. His expression: absolute emptiness.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This is all I've ever been.

(beat)

All I'll ever be.

**SCENE 15 - INT. STATE PRISON - CELL BLOCK - NIGHT**

Metal bars clank shut behind Eli (22).

His face is gaunt, his eyes hollow.

He carries a folded mattress and a small plastic bin of state-issued clothes.

**GUARD**

(cell number)

Thirty-four. On the left.

Eli nods.



He walks past rows of cells, avoiding eye contact with the inmates leering at him through the bars.

**CELLMATE (O.S.)**

Welcome home.

Eli stops in front of **CELL 34**.

Inside, a huge man with tattoos across his scalp lounges on the bottom bunk.

Eli says nothing.

**INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT**

Eli lies awake on the bunk, eyes fixed on the dark ceiling.

A single tear slides down his temple.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I was never gonna be anything but this.

**EXT. PRISON GATES - DAWN**

A chain-link gate groans open.

Eli (35) steps through, holding a small box of state-issued belongings.

The sun crests over the treeline, blinding.

He squints into the light—unsure what freedom even feels like.

**INT. PAROLE OFFICE - MORNING**

**Parole Officer CARL SIMMONS (50s)** sits across a metal desk, studying Eli's file.

A laminated sheet of **conditions of release** sits between them.

**SIMMONS**

You'll report twice a week. You'll submit to random drug screens. No alcohol, no contact with minors.

Eli nods silently.

**SIMMONS** (CONT'D)

If you fail to comply with any condition, you go back inside. You understand?

**ELI**

Yes.

**SIMMONS**

Don't look for sympathy here. My job is to make sure you don't hurt anybody else.

Eli stares at the tabletop.

**SIMMONS** (CONT'D)

You got somewhere to stay?

**ELI**

Halfway house.

**SIMMONS**

You got a job lined up?

**ELI**

Not yet.

Simmons scribbles something down.

**SIMMONS**

Better figure it out fast.

**EXT. HALFWAY HOUSE - DAY**

A peeling two-story building surrounded by chain-link fence.

Eli stands on the sidewalk, watching two men smoke on the porch.

He sets down his box, takes a shaky breath, and walks inside.

**INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - ROOM - NIGHT**

Eli unpacks what little he owns.

At the bottom of the box is his **old list of names**, now creased and yellowed.

He smooths it out on the bedspread.

His finger traces each name.

**INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

A small, sparsely furnished room.

The walls are bare except for a taped-up calendar.

Eli sits on the edge of a twin bed, still in his work clothes.

A battered television flickers on a rickety dresser.

On screen, a movie plays:

A man and a woman stand on a front porch, kissing as their children laugh and run through the yard.

Soft music swells—a perfect happy ending.

Eli leans forward, elbows on his knees, staring blankly at the screen.

**TV DIALOGUE (V.O.)**

I told you, I'd come back for you.  
Always.

**WOMAN (V.O.)**

I never stopped waiting.

They kiss again.

The credits start rolling over bright, sunlit images.

Eli's eyes well up.

He swallows hard, trying to force it back.

He scrubs a hand over his face.

A choked sob escapes.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I never even had a chance.

He wipes his nose on his sleeve.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

I wanted that.

(beat)

More than anything.

He doesn't turn off the TV.

He just sits there in the flickering light, tears running down his cheeks.

**EXT. SMALL RENTAL OFFICE - DAY**

Eli sits in a cracked plastic chair, waiting to be called.

A **MANAGER (40s)** steps into the doorway, holding Eli's application.

**MANAGER**

Eli Parker?

Eli stands.

**MANAGER (CONT'D)**

(avoids eye contact)

We're...gonna pass. Sorry.

Eli doesn't argue. He just nods and leaves.

**MONTAGE - ELI'S DAYS AFTER RELEASE:**

Eli walking door to door with a resume nobody will touch.

Eli sitting in the library, staring at the classifieds.

Eli standing on a street corner, smoking.

Eli flipping the list over in his hands again and again.

**EXT. SMALL HOUSE - EVENING**

Eli stands across the street from Amber's house.

He watches from the shadows as she carries groceries inside.

A boy—**his son (12)**—runs out to help her.

Eli swallows hard.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I missed everything.

**Amber's boyfriend comes to the door, kissing her cheek.**

The boy laughs.

Eli turns away, shoulders hunched.

**INT. PAROLE OFFICE - DAY**

Simmons reads from a clipboard.

**SIMMONS**

Still no job?

Eli shakes his head.

**SIMMONS (CONT'D)**

You're on thin ice.

Eli doesn't answer.

**SIMMONS (CONT'D)**

One slip. You hear me?

Eli looks up, something hollow behind his eyes.

**ELI**

I hear you.

**INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli sits on the edge of his bed, smoking.

The list is pinned to the wall beside him.

One by one, he underlines each name.

**ELI (V.O.)**

They made me.

(beat)

And they'll pay for it.

**INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - BEDROOM - EVENING**

Eli (35) sits on the edge of his narrow bed, still wearing the same clothes he left in that morning.

A job application sits torn in half on the floor.

The room is silent except for the low hum of a neighbor's TV through the wall.

Eli rubs his eyes with the heels of his palms, fighting the wave of exhaustion and shame.

His hands fall to his lap.

He stares down at them as if they belong to someone else.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

I tried.

(beat)

God knows I tried.

His gaze drifts to the nightstand.

A bottle of pills sits beside a glass of water.

He stares at it for a long time.

**FLASH CUTS:**

A little boy in a dark bedroom, wishing someone would come save him.

Eli in a holding cell.

Amber in court, crying.

His jaw clenches.

Eli starts crying.

He reaches out, picks up the bottle.

He turns it over in his hand, thumb resting on the cap.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

(crying)

Nobody's ever going to let me be more than this.

(beat) wipes tears from his eyes.

Not them.

(beat)

Not me.

He unscrews the cap, pours a few pills into his palm.

He stares at them.

His breathing grows ragged.

His hand trembles.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

I don't want to do this anymore.

A tear slips down his cheek.

He closes his fist around the pills—but doesn't lift them to his mouth.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

But I don't want to die alone.

Slowly, he opens his hand and lets the pills spill back into the bottle.

He sets it down.

He wipes his face with a shaking hand, staring at the blank wall.

**SCENE 16 - INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli (40) sits at a small table in the communal kitchen.

A single cupcake sits in front of him with a crooked candle stuck in the frosting.

He flicks a lighter and watches the flame dance.

No one else is there.

**CLOSE ON:**

His face in the candlelight—hollowed out, expressionless.

He takes a slow drag from a cigarette.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Forty.

(beat)

I thought I'd be dead by now.

He watches the wax drip down the side of the cupcake.

**INT. HALFWAY HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli stands at the mirror, buttoning a clean shirt.

He studies his reflection like it's a stranger.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I tried.

(beat)

God knows I tried.

He takes the list from the wall, folds it carefully, and tucks it into his back pocket.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, hands in his pockets.

Every step feels deliberate.

He stops in front of a darkened storefront.

In the reflection of the glass, he sees himself—and all the versions of the boy he used to be.

**ELI (V.O.)**

They took everything.

(beat)

Now I'll take it back.

He turns and keeps walking.

**EXT. AMBER'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli sits in a borrowed car across the street.

The engine idles quietly.

Through the window, he watches Amber laughing with her children in the living room.

His eyes move to his son—now almost grown.

For a moment, his face softens.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought maybe you'd save me.

(beat)

But you were just another thing I  
lost.

He looks down at the list in his hand.

Amber's name isn't on it.

**INT. DINGY MOTEL ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT**

Eli sets the list on the nightstand beside a battered duffel bag.



He unzips the bag.

Inside:

A handgun.

A folding knife.

Duct tape.

A small box of bullets.

He lays everything out neatly on the bed.

**INT. MOTEL BATHROOM - NIGHT**

Eli stands at the sink, looking into the cracked mirror.

He lifts a disposable razor, begins shaving carefully.

Each stroke scrapes away another piece of the man who tried to survive.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Young Eli hiding under blankets.

The babysitter's hands on him.

Uncle Ray standing in the doorway.

Amber crying in the courtroom.

Simmons smirking across a desk.

Eli's hand trembles, but he finishes the last stroke.

He wipes blood from a nick on his jaw.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This was always gonna end here.

**INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT**

Eli sits on the edge of the bed.

He lights a cigarette.

He picks up the list and starts crossing out names—one by one.

But he stops before the last name:

**Myself.**

He stares at it, smoke curling around his face.

**EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - PRE-DAWN**

Eli gets into the car.

He rests both hands on the wheel.

The sky starts to pale behind the buildings.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This is it.

(beat)

No more pretending.

(beat)

No more waiting.

He starts the engine.

**SCENE 17 - EXT. WALTER GRADY'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

A small clapboard bungalow on a quiet street.

A porch light glows over the front steps.

Eli sits in the car across the street, engine off.

He watches the house, smoking.

**ELI (V.O.)**

He said he wanted to help me.

(beat)

But all he wanted was another piece  
to take.

He tosses the cigarette out.

**INT. WALTER'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Walter (now 74) sits in a recliner, dozing with the TV on low.

The front door eases open.

Eli steps inside, silent.

He closes the door and locks it behind him.

He stands there a moment, watching Walter sleep.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Walter's hand on his knee.

Walter's voice: *You owe me.*

**ELI (V.O.)**

You were the last straw.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli crosses the room.

He kneels beside the recliner.

Walter's eyes flutter open, confused.

**WALTER**

What...?

Eli presses the barrel of the gun to Walter's chest.

Walter's eyes widen in terror.

**WALTER (CONT'D)**

Eli...please—

**ELI**

You made me.

(beat)

All of you did.

Walter starts to cry.

**WALTER**

I'm sorry. I—I didn't mean—

**ELI**

Yes, you did.

Walter reaches out a trembling hand.

Eli doesn't flinch.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

God forgives.

Walter gasps, hopeful.

Eli pulls the trigger.

**BANG.**

Walter's body slumps.

ELI (CONT'D)  
I.. Don't.

Blood blooms across his shirt. Eli sits back on his heels, breathing hard.

**INT. WALTER'S BATHROOM - NIGHT**

Eli washes the blood off his hands, methodical.

He looks in the mirror.

For the first time, he doesn't look like a victim.

He looks like something else—**something finished.**

**INT. WALTER'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Eli stands over the body.

He takes the folded list from his pocket.

He crosses out **Walter Grady's name** with slow, deliberate strokes.

ELI (V.O.)  
One down.

**EXT. WALTER'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli steps into the night.

He closes the door behind him, careful.

He doesn't look back.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, the list clutched in one hand.

He disappears into darkness.

**SCENE 18 - EXT. GRANDMA AND GRANDPA'S OLD HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli stands in the overgrown yard, staring up at the sagging porch.

The house is dark—windows boarded, paint peeling.

He steps onto the porch.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I used to hide under this porch.

(beat)

I thought if I was small enough,  
quiet enough...you wouldn't find me.

**INT. FOYER - NIGHT**

Eli pushes the door open.

Inside: dusty furniture, old curtains hanging in tatters.

**A lamp glows in the back hallway.**

**ELI (V.O.)**

But you always found me.

**INT. BACK BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Uncle Ray (now mid-40s) sits in a recliner, a TV tray in front of him cluttered with beer cans.

He glances up, squinting.

**UNCLE RAY**

Who the hell—?

Eli steps into the light.

Uncle Ray's eyes go wide.

**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

Eli?

Eli doesn't speak. He closes the door behind him.

Uncle Ray struggles to his feet, suddenly uncertain.

**UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)**

I—listen, I know you been through  
some shit, but—

Eli pulls the gun from his waistband.

Uncle Ray raises his hands.

**UNCLE RAY** (CONT'D)  
Hey-hey, we don't gotta do this.

Eli steps closer.

**ELI**  
I was six. I was Eighteen.

Uncle Ray blinks, confused.

**ELI** (CONT'D)  
The first time you came into my  
room.

Uncle Ray's mouth opens and closes.

**UNCLE RAY**  
I-Eli-

**ELI**  
I was six.  
(voice breaking)  
And you made me feel like it was my  
fault.

Uncle Ray starts crying.

**UNCLE RAY**  
I'm sorry-

**ELI**  
No, you're not.

Eli steps in, presses the barrel under Ray's chin.

**ELI** (CONT'D)  
You're only sorry you can't do it  
again.

Uncle Ray's lip quivers.

**UNCLE RAY**  
Please...

**FLASH CUTS:**

A small boy curled up in a bed.

The creak of the door.

The reek of beer breath.

Eli's voice: *Please don't.*

**\*\*Eli's hands shake.**

For a moment, he almost lowers the gun.

Then his face hardens.

**ELI**

I can't forgive you, but..

Uncle Ray looks up, relieved.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

... I won't let you live.

**BANG.**

Blood spatters across the wall.

Uncle Ray crumples.

**INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels by the body.

He unfolds the list.

He draws a thick black line through:

Ray Parker

**ELI (V.O.)**

Two down.

**INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT**

Eli opens the refrigerator.

Inside: a single six-pack of cheap beer.

He takes one, cracks it open.

He sits at the kitchen table, drinking in silence.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought it would feel better.

(beat)

It doesn't.

**EXT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli steps onto the porch.

He turns to look back at the door one last time.

Then he walks away into the darkness.

**SCENE 19 - EXT. SMALL TRAILER - NIGHT**

A weathered single-wide trailer sits on cinderblocks, porch light buzzing with moths.

Eli stands in the yard, the gun tucked inside his coat.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I remember the smell of her  
perfume.

(beat)

How she said she was helping me.

He closes his eyes, takes a slow breath.

**INT. TRAILER LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Pam Haskins (now 50s) sits in a recliner, watching a game show with the volume too loud.

She wears a dingy pink robe, hair thin and gray.

The door creaks open.

Pam jumps, squinting at the silhouette in the doorway.

**PAM**

Who--? Who's there?

Eli steps inside, quiet as a shadow.

Pam fumbles for the lamp, flicking it on.

Her eyes widen when she sees him.

**PAM (CONT'D)**

Eli?

**FLASH CUTS:**

Six-year-old Eli lying on her guest bed.



Her hand sliding under the blanket.

Her voice: *It's our secret.*

Pam covers her mouth with trembling fingers.

**PAM** (CONT'D)

I—I heard you was in prison.

Eli says nothing.

**PAM** (CONT'D)

(voice cracking)

I...I was sick. I didn't know what I was doing.

He takes a step closer.

**ELI**

You knew.

Pam starts crying.

**PAM**

I was lonely. I—God forgive me—I just wanted—

**ELI**

Someone to hurt.

Pam shakes her head.

**PAM**

No...please...don't...

**ELI**

You were the first.

Pam sobs.

**PAM**

I'm sorry, baby—I'm so sorry.

Eli draws the gun.

**ELI**

I'm not your baby.

He raises it, aiming at her heart.

Pam whispers a prayer.

**PAM**

Our Father, who art in—

**BANG.**

Pam slumps sideways, the prayer unfinished.

**INT. TRAILER LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels beside her body.

He takes the list from his pocket, crossing out:

Pam Haskins

He lingers a moment.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Three down.

(beat)

Still doesn't feel like enough.

**INT. TRAILER BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Eli stands in the doorway, staring at the bed where she molested him.

He steps closer, touches the worn quilt with one gloved hand.

**FLASH CUT:**

Little Eli crying silently under the covers.

He yanks the quilt off and stuffs it into a trash bag.

**EXT. TRAILER - NIGHT**

Eli walks out carrying the trash bag.

He doesn't look back.

He gets into his car and drives away.

**EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT**

Eli stops to fill the tank.

As the pump clicks, he watches the lights of the freeway.

For a moment, he almost looks peaceful.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought killing you would make it stop.

(beat)

It didn't.

**SCENE 20 - EXT. RUNDOWN HOUSE - NIGHT**

A sagging clapboard house with a smashed porch light.

A **motorcycle** leans against the steps.

Eli sits in his car across the street, watching.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Randy Cole.

(beat)

The man who taught me what fear tastes like.

**EXT. RUNDOWN HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli steps up to the door, gun hidden under his coat.

He knocks, hard.

Footsteps inside.

The door cracks open.

**RANDY COLE (60s)** peers out, a beer in one hand. His gut hangs over his belt. His eyes are yellowed with drink.

**RANDY**

Yeah?

Eli meets his gaze—unblinking.

**ELI**

You remember me?

Randy squints, confused. Then recognition spreads across his face.

**RANDY**

Shit. You're Denise's kid.

Eli doesn't answer.

Randy smirks.

**RANDY** (CONT'D)

Little pussy, always crying.

He starts to laugh.

**RANDY** (CONT'D)

You here to beg for money?

Eli pulls the gun, shoving the barrel into Randy's mouth.

Randy's laughter cuts off in a wet gasp.

**ELI**

No.

(voice trembling with rage)

I'm here to end this.

Randy's eyes widen.

Eli forces him backward into the living room.

#### **INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Wayne Cole (50s) is passed out on the couch in a stained undershirt.

Eli kicks the coffee table out of the way.

Randy gags around the barrel.

Wayne jerks awake.

**WAYNE**

What the fuck—?

Eli points the gun at him.

**ELI**

Stay down.

Wayne raises his hands, breathing hard.

Randy tries to talk. Eli jerks the gun out of his mouth.

**RANDY**

You—you don't gotta do this—

**ELI**

You remember the belt?

Randy's mouth opens and closes.

**ELI** (CONT'D)

How you laughed while you beat me?

Randy starts to sob.

**RANDY**

I was drunk—Christ, I didn't mean—

**ELI**

You meant every second.

Eli's hands tremble, but he steadies the gun.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Six-year-old Eli hiding under the kitchen table.

Randy screaming.

The belt swinging.

The smell of whiskey and blood.

**Eli's face twists**—the rage he's held for decades finally breaking through.

**ELI** (CONT'D)

You don't get to leave this world  
thinking you were just drunk.

(beat)

You were evil.

Randy covers his face, sobbing.

**RANDY**

Please—

**ELI**

No.

**BANG.**

Randy collapses onto the floor.

Eli turns to Wayne.

Wayne scrambles backward off the couch.

**WAYNE**

It wasn't me—I never touched you—

**ELI**

You watched.

(beat)

You let it happen.

Wayne shakes his head, babbling.

**WAYNE**

I was just—Jesus—I was just trying  
to get by—

Eli steps forward.

**ELI**

So was I.

(beat)

Look how that turned out.

**WAYNE**

Please—

**ELI**

Shut up.

**BANG.**

Wayne slumps against the wall, eyes glassy.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels between their bodies.

He unfolds the list.

He crosses out:

Randy Cole

Wayne Cole

His hand is steady now.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Four. Five.

(beat)

Still not enough.

**EXT. RUNDOWN HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli steps onto the porch.

Blood spatters his shirt.

He doesn't bother to wipe it off.

He lights a cigarette and looks up at the stars.

For a moment, he almost smiles.

**EXT. SIDE STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks away, list in hand.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought I'd feel like a monster.

(beat)

I just feel...finished.

**SCENE 21 - INT. HOSPICE ROOM - NIGHT**

A small, sterile room, lit only by a lamp.

**Denise Parker (now early 60s)** lies in a hospital bed, oxygen tube in her nose.

Her skin is paper-thin, her hair brittle and gray.

A portable heart monitor beeps softly.

Eli stands in the doorway, watching her breathe.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Forty years.

(beat)

I waited for you to come back, Be  
the mom I needed you to be.

**INT. HOSPICE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli sits beside the bed.

Denise's eyes flutter open, unfocused.

She blinks at him.

**DENISE**

(weak)

Ryan...?

Eli's jaw tightens.

**ELI**

No.

(beat)

It's Eli.

Her eyes clear a little. Recognition flickers.

**DENISE**

Eli.

She tries to lift her hand. It trembles and falls back onto the blanket.

**DENISE (CONT'D)**

I...missed you.

**ELI**

Did you?

She swallows, eyes wet.

**DENISE**

I was sick. I didn't know how to be a mother.

Eli studies her face.

**ELI**

You knew how to hurt me.

Denise closes her eyes. A tear slides down her cheek.

**DENISE**

I'm sorry.

**ELI**

No.

(voice breaking)

You're not.

**FLASH CUTS:**

A little boy in Spider-Man pajamas.

Her belt swinging down.

A kitchen reeking of gin.

Denise coughs, wheezing.

**DENISE**

I...loved you.



Eli's eyes fill, but he doesn't look away.

**ELI**

No.

(beat)

You loved the drugs. You loved the men.

(voice low)

You never loved me.

Denise tries to speak again, but she can't catch her breath.

Her eyes search his face, desperate.

Eli reaches out, touches her cheek.

Her skin is cool.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

I'll try to forgive you.

Her gaze softens—hope flickers in her eyes.

Eli lifts his hand to her oxygen tube.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

But I can't let you live.

He pinches the tube closed.

Denise struggles, mouth opening and closing.

A thin wheeze.

Eli's face is wet with tears.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

I waited so long for you to save me.

Her eyes flutter. The heart monitor begins to wail.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

You never came.

Denise exhales one final time.

The monitor goes flat.

**INT. HOSPICE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli stands over her body.

He wipes his face with the back of his hand.

He takes out the list.

He crosses out:

Denise Parker

**ELI (V.O.)**

Six.

(beat)

No peace.

**EXT. HOSPICE PARKING LOT - NIGHT**

Eli sits behind the wheel of the car, engine off.

He watches the front doors.

A nurse steps out, lighting a cigarette.

Eli looks down at his hands—still trembling.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought this would set me free.

(beat)

All it did was prove I was right.

He turns the key.

The engine rumbles to life.

**EXT. EMPTY ROAD - NIGHT**

The car disappears into the darkness.

**SCENE 22 - EXT. GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE - NIGHT**

The same old house—peeling paint, weeds overtaking the porch.

A single light glows in the kitchen window.

Eli steps from the shadows, hood pulled over his face.

He stands at the gate, staring up at the roof.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This is where it started.

(beat)

Where they told me I was nothing.

**INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT**

**Grandma Doris (70s)** sits hunched over a mug of tea, watching the clock.

She's thinner now, her hair a wispy halo.

**Grandpa Harold (80s)** dozes in a recliner in the next room, TV flickering.

The back door creaks open.

Doris looks up, startled.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Who's there?

Eli steps into the kitchen.

She squints, frowning.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You got no business here.

Eli says nothing. He closes the door quietly.

**GRANDMA DORIS (CONT'D)**

You think you can just come in here  
and—

Eli draws the gun, laying it on the table between them.

Her mouth snaps shut.

**ELI**

All my life, you told me I was  
worthless.

Her lips tremble, but she keeps her chin lifted.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

You were.

Eli studies her, voice calm.

**ELI**

I believed you.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Harold stirs awake, blinking at the TV.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Doris? Who's that talkin'?

Doris glances toward him but doesn't answer.

Eli steps into the doorway.

Harold squints.

**GRANDPA HAROLD (CONT'D)**

That Eli?

Eli nods once.

**GRANDPA HAROLD (CONT'D)**

You here to beg?

Eli shakes his head.

**ELI**

I'm here to finish up.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Young Eli sitting on the porch, shivering in winter.

Doris dumping a plate of cold food in the trash while he watched.

Harold slapping him across the face.

Doris' voice: *Even your own mother didn't want you.*

**ELI (CONT'D)**

You broke me before anyone else could.

(beat)

I want you to know that.

Doris' eyes fill with tears—but she doesn't look away.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

You were always a disappointment.

**ELI**

So were you.

He raises the gun.

Harold's eyes widen.

**GRANDPA HAROLD**

Wait—

**BANG.**

Harold slumps sideways, dead.

Doris gasps, clutches her chest.

Eli steps close to Doris.

She looks up at him, tears streaking her lined face.

**GRANDMA DORIS**

Do it.

Eli meets her gaze.

**ELI**

You don't get to choose.

He lowers the gun to her chest.

**ELI (CONT'D)**

I do.

**BANG.**

She slides off her chair onto the floor.

**INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels between them, unfolding the list.

He crosses out:

Doris Parker  
Harold Parker

He studies the remaining names:

Linda Wells  
Derrick Wells  
Caleb  
Judge Collins  
Carl Simmons

He touches each name, almost tender.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Almost done.

(beat)

Almost free.

**EXT. GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE - NIGHT**

Eli steps out into the cool air.

He looks up at the stars, breathing deeply.

**ELI (V.O.)**

They said I was cursed.

(beat)

Maybe they were right.

He walks down the steps, disappearing into the dark.

**SCENE 23 - EXT. LINDA WELLS' HOUSE - NIGHT**

A modest brick home with a tidy lawn.

A porch light glows over flowerpots.

Eli sits in the car across the street.

He watches the front door for a long moment, smoking.

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought maybe you were better  
than the rest.

(beat)

Then you left me in that room.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Little Eli telling Linda about Derrick.

Linda's cold voice: *Don't lie about my son.*

Derrick pushing Eli into a corner, laughing.

Eli drops the cigarette, grinding it under his heel.

**INT. LINDA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

**Linda Wells (60s)** sits in a recliner, knitting.  
Her hands tremble slightly with age.

The front door opens quietly.

Linda looks up, frowning.

**LINDA**

Who's there?

Eli steps inside, hood up, gun in hand.

Linda's mouth opens in shock.

**LINDA (CONT'D)**

Eli?

**ELI**

You remember what you told me?

Linda blinks, confused.

**LINDA**

I...I don't—

**ELI**

*Don't lie about my son.*

Her lip quivers.

**LINDA**

I didn't know—

**ELI**

You didn't care.

Linda sets the knitting aside, hands raised.

**LINDA**

I tried to help you.

**ELI**

No.

(voice hard)

You tried to protect him.

**INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER**

**Derrick Wells (now 45)** emerges from a back bedroom, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

**DERRICK**

Ma? What's all the noise—

He stops dead when he sees Eli.

**DERRICK (CONT'D)**

Oh...shit.

**ELI**

You remember me.

Derrick's eyes flick to the gun.

**DERRICK**

Listen—we were kids. I didn't mean  
nothing by it—

**ELI**

You were seventeen.

(beat)

I was eight.

Derrick starts backing down the hall.

**DERRICK**

Please—man—c'mon—

Eli raises the gun.

**ELI**

You don't get to be scared.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Derrick pinning Eli down.

Linda standing in the doorway, turning away.

**BANG.**

Derrick drops to the floor, eyes wide in shock.

Linda lets out a ragged sob.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli stands over Linda.

She's crying silently, rocking back and forth.

**LINDA**

I was just trying to help—

**ELI**

You failed.

He lifts the gun.

Linda closes her eyes.



**ELI** (CONT'D)  
I wont forgive you.

(beat)

But I can't let you live.

**BANG.**

**EXT. SMALL APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT**

Eli stands outside a cracked wooden door.

A mailbox reads: **C. Jenkins.**

He knocks twice.

**INT. APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER**

**Caleb** (late 30s) opens the door, confused.

**CALEB**  
Yeah?

Eli steps into the doorway.

Caleb's eyes go wide.

**CALEB** (CONT'D)  
Holy shit-you-

Eli doesn't wait.

**BANG.**

Caleb hits the floor, dead.

**INT. APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels, unfolding the list.

He crosses out:

Linda Wells  
Derrick Wells  
Caleb

His hand is perfectly steady.

**ELI** (V.O.)  
Eight.

(beat)

Almost done.

**EXT. EMPTY STREET - NIGHT**

Eli walks alone, blood on his sleeve.

**ELI (V.O.)**

They'll never hurt anyone else.

(beat)

They'll never tell me it didn't happen.

He looks up at the stars.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

Two names left.

**SCENE 24 - EXT. JUDGE COLLINS' SUBURBAN HOUSE - NIGHT**

A pristine brick house with manicured shrubs.

Warm yellow light glows through the living room curtains.

Eli watches from across the street, sitting in his car.

Rain taps softly on the windshield.

**ELI (V.O.)**

You looked me in the eye and told me I was beyond saving.

(beat)

Maybe you were right.

**INT. JUDGE COLLINS' LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

**Judge Meredith Collins (70s)** sits at the piano, playing a slow hymn.

She wears a navy cardigan, hair pinned neatly.

The front door clicks open.

Collins stops, hands hovering over the keys.

**JUDGE COLLINS**

Hello?

Eli steps inside, hood dripping rain.

He closes the door.

**JUDGE COLLINS** (CONT'D)  
(voice steady)  
Mr. Parker.

Eli studies her, surprised she remembers.

**ELI**  
You know who I am.

**JUDGE COLLINS**  
Of course.

She folds her hands in her lap.

**JUDGE COLLINS** (CONT'D)  
I prayed you'd find peace.

Eli almost laughs—a bitter sound.

**ELI**  
I found something else.

**JUDGE COLLINS**  
If you do this, it won't change  
what happened to you.

Eli steps closer.

**ELI**  
No.

(beat)  
But it will end it.

He raises the gun.

**JUDGE COLLINS**  
I'm sorry.

Eli looks her in the eye.

**ELI**  
So am I.

**BANG.**

She slumps over the piano keys.

A single discordant note rings out.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli kneels, crossing out:

Judge Collins

He pauses, hand trembling just once.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Nine.

**EXT. PAROLE OFFICE - NIGHT**

A dull brick building, one light still on upstairs.

Eli walks across the lot, rain soaking his shoulders.

He pushes the door open.

**INT. PAROLE OFFICE - HALLWAY - NIGHT**

**Carl Simmons (50s)** sits at his desk, working late.

He looks up in surprise.

**SIMMONS**

Jesus—you can't be here.

Eli doesn't answer. He steps into the office.

Simmons rises, voice firm.

**SIMMONS (CONT'D)**

Sit down. I'm calling this in.

Eli draws the gun.

Simmons freezes.

**SIMMONS (CONT'D)**

Think about what you're doing.

**ELI**

I have.

(voice calm)

Every day.

Simmons' face pales.

**SIMMONS**

You were never going to make it.

**ELI**

No.

(beat)

Because you never believed I could.

**FLASH CUTS:**

Simmons sneering in parole meetings.

Amber crying in court.

Eli's cell door slamming shut.

**SIMMONS**

Please—

Eli fires.

**BANG.**

Simmons drops to the floor, a red stain spreading across his shirt.

**INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER**

Eli sits in Simmons' chair.

He takes out the list.

The final name:

Carl Simmons

He draws a slow line through it.

He sets the list on the desk.

**ELI (V.O.)**

Ten.

(beat)

No more names.

**EXT. PAROLE OFFICE - NIGHT**

Eli steps into the rain, face turned up to the sky.

For the first time, his shoulders look light—like he has finally laid down a burden.

**ELI (V.O.)**

This is it.

(beat)

I have nothing left to do.

**EXT. POLICE STATION - DAWN**

Flashing lights strobe over a crowd of reporters.

Crime scene tape flutters in the cold wind.

A SHERIFF (50s) stands at a podium, voice heavy.

**SHERIFF**

—believed responsible for ten  
homicides across the state. The  
suspect is Eli Parker.

Cameras flash in rapid bursts.

**INT. AMBER'S KITCHEN - DAWN**

Amber (mid-30s) stands motionless in front of the TV.

Her husband hovers behind her, hand on her shoulder.

On screen, Eli's mugshot appears beside the words:

MONSTER OR VICTIM?

Amber's son (13) walks in, rubbing his eyes.

**SON**

Mom...?

She tries to speak. Her voice breaks.

**AMBER**

Go back to your room, baby.

**INT. NEWSROOM - MORNING**

A reporter pins photos of all ten victims to a corkboard.

Below, a headline reads:

SYSTEMIC FAILURE: HOW THE STATE LOST ELI PARKER

**INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - MORNING**

Eli's son stands at his locker while kids whisper.

**KID 1**

That's the killer's kid.

**KID 2**

I heard he shot everybody.

The boy clenches his fists, fighting tears.

**INT. SMALL CHURCH - MORNING**

Aaron Mitchell (40s) sits alone in a pew, holding a folded newspaper.

He whispers, voice cracking:

**AARON MITCHELL**

I'm sorry, Eli. I'm so damn sorry.

**INT. NEWS STUDIO - DAY**

An analyst faces the camera.

**ANALYST**

Some will call him a monster.  
Others will say he was a child  
failed by every adult around him.  
The truth is probably both.

**FADE IN:**

**EXT. RIVERBANK - NIGHT**

The same river where Eli once sat with Amber, dreaming of escape.

Eli (40) stands alone, wind tugging at his coat.

His breath fogs in the cold air.

**CLOSE ON:**

His hands—steady, calm.

In one hand, the folded list.

Every name crossed out—except:

Myself

**He unfolds it, staring at that last word.**

**ELI (V.O.)**

I thought if I took them all away...

(beat)

I'd feel clean again.

He kneels by the water, staring at his reflection.

**FLASH CUTS:**

His mother's face, crying.

Randy's belt swinging.

Walter's hand on his knee.

A tiny boy hiding under blankets.

His son's face at the courthouse.

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

But there's no clean.

(beat)

There's just the end.

**He pulls the gun from his coat.**

He lifts it under his chin.

His finger tightens on the trigger—then stops.

**He closes his eyes.**

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

I don't know if I'm a monster...

(beat)

Or if I was just what they made me.

**His thumb caresses the trigger.**

For a moment, he lowers the gun—then lifts it again.

**A single tear slides down his cheek.**

**ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

All I ever wanted was...

(voice breaks)

To be something good.



**He takes a long breath.**

His finger tightens again.

**FADE TO BLACK.**

**A FINAL TITLE CARD:**

"Hurt people, End up hurting people."

"Some wounds never close."

On Screen Text:

**Foster Care in America: The Unseen Crisis**

More than **400,000 children** are currently in foster care in the United States.

While foster care is intended as a safe haven, many children continue to experience **abuse and neglect within the system itself.**

In **2019**, nearly **50,000 cases of abuse were substantiated**—more than **9 cases per 1,000 children in care.**

**Types of Maltreatment**

**Neglect:** Over **53%** of children in foster care experience neglect.

**Physical Abuse:** Nearly **16%** are victims of physical abuse.

**Sexual Abuse:** Occurs in **4.4%** of cases.

**Factors to Consider**

**Underreporting and Variability:**

True rates may be higher. Many incidents are never reported or are documented inconsistently across states.

**Existing Trauma:** Most children enter foster care already having experienced abuse or neglect, making them especially vulnerable to further harm—and making new abuse harder to identify.

(MORE)

ELI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Eli Parker's story may be partially fictional, but it reflects the real experiences of countless children failed by the systems meant to protect them.